

REPRESENTING THE LIBRARY

by

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‘What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?  
I never know what you are thinking. Think.’

T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*

But if thou shalt cast all away as vain,  
I know not but ‘twill make me dream again.

John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*

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## ABSTRACT

Approaching the idea of the library as a polyvocal, self-contradictory and even paradoxical dream, this thesis examines five select texts to examine how this dream emerges across vastly different representations in fiction. Discussed texts include Jorge Luis Borges' "The Library of Babel" and "The Book of Sand," Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, and Thomas Wharton's *Salamander*. Special attention is given to the archetypal opposition between daytime's clarity and night's disorder, as well as to Alberto Manguel's two hypothesized library foundational myths, the Tower of Babel and the Library of Alexandria. Although it attempts to remain conscious of social realities surrounding and producing historical libraries, this thesis is primarily concerned with the textual irruption of libraries in fictional narratives, and while its argument articulates the problematic dimension of libraries, it also endeavours to show how libraries are healthy, necessary, and even inevitable human creations.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I would like to thank Dr. Dean Irvine, whose initial suggestion, which would have been so easy to miss, has instead formed an essential part of this thesis. Dr. Elizabeth Edwards has also provided important insights and criticisms, for which I am grateful. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Alice Brittan (again!) for the hours, ink, and passion she has invested in this thesis: it is, I think, not an exaggeration to say that her words have essentially made this project possible, and I happily acknowledge my great debt to her. Any faults contained herein are entirely my own, and not a reflection on the assiduous attention these readers have given this project.

Last, I should say that my words today would be unthinkable without having had access to various libraries throughout my life. In no small measure, this thesis is for them.



# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I'm Margarita Staples... Extreme librarian. Bookaneer.

China Miéville, *Un Lun Dun*

## 1.1 POLYPHONIC BEGINNINGS

How to begin to talk about the library? For a subject as broad as the library it seems necessary to begin by acknowledging the many ways of seeing and representing the library. To some the library can seem dull and musty, while to others a library seems vibrant and colourful, a carnival of printed voices. Washington Irving's short narrative meditation on libraries and time, "The Mutability of Literature," confidently claims that the library is "fitted for quiet study and profound meditation" (101).<sup>1</sup> Architecturally speaking a library can be a shelf of books above a child's bed or a building at the center of town, a massive institutional fortress or a single object carried and treasured. In the abstract, libraries with indefinite collections have more amorphous boundaries. On the whole the library has many faces and speaks with many tongues, some opposed to others. If its polyphonic nature suggests a bewildering number of representations in fiction, then we must accept this variety as given, and look within the differences for a form of unity.

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<sup>1</sup> Going even further, Robert Darnton calls university libraries "citadels of learning" (32), voicing a common association between libraries and strongholds, between knowledge and treasure worthy of protection.

Jacques Derrida and Alberto Manguel identify certain paradoxes as fundamental aporias within the library's nature. Derrida defines libraries in *Geneses, Genealogies, Genres, & Genius* (2006) with a casual paradox: he says they are "in general... places devoted to keeping the secret but insofar as they give it away" (20), which is to say that a library only stores its texts in order to provide them to others. This conundrum is similar to his previous arguments in *Archive Fever* (1995), where Derrida finds a series of schisms in the library's archival *raison d'être*: he argues, most notably, that the rational impulse to store and preserve is also an irrational fever. Manguel's prolific writings locate a similarly divisive function in the library's philosophy. He argues that all libraries inevitably pursue two mythic "impossible yearnings": any library, he says, desires to conquer both space and time (*Night* 19). Although these yearnings are impossible to reconcile, or even institute, together they underwrite the library's promise to its collection. Derrida and Manguel help us to trace a system of paradoxes that afflicts the library's fundamental impulses to preserve, order, collect, and make accessible the common heritage of memory: for what is preserved is never all that could have been, what is ordered can always be strategically re-ordered, what is collected can be lost, and study, we know, is never unequivocal. These are intractable issues and I present them here to emphasize the complexity which forms the very essence of the library. Before addressing these irresolvable paradoxes, I will first make some observations, by way of three images, about the library as a representational trope.

The library's image in fiction is fairly recognizable to readers in English. A comfortably conventional image, the library stands, on the one hand, for much of what at least appears to be good in civilization: the richly upholstered reading room, complete with solid shelves lined with heavy books, evocative of a literary culture Matthew Arnold famously deemed "sweetness and light" (37). Well-ordered and impeccably preserved, closely identified with authority, the library serves as general shorthand for historical and social privilege, quietly representing the ancestral power and financial means necessary to accumulate and maintain cultural capital, not to mention its underlying celebration of literacy itself. Preserving books for study is a traditionally laudable task ensuring cultural continuity and remembrance; an answer, if necessarily imperfect, to threats of entropy and "taxonomies of loss," as Michael Bywater's recent *Lost Worlds* (2004) puts it. The range of libraries allows for multiple representational strategies: personal libraries, large national libraries, university libraries, and public libraries. More obscure is the rarefied type of the library, exemplified by George Steiner's suggestion in *After Babel* that a "true Shakespeare library is, of itself, very nearly a summation of human enterprise" (25). Steiner's grandiose abstraction is impossible to realize; nevertheless, it too is a library. Whether actively explored as a symbol or not, the library bears a recognizable history with overtones of privilege, pride, and healthy stability.

Even in these general terms, another way of seeing the library must be recognized, a contrapuntal history that might be deemed "bitter and poorly lit." For, on the other hand, the library is the ultimate representative of pride, privilege, and frozen *rigidity*.

Private libraries are exclusionary gate-keepers and silent witnesses to continued cultural distinctions. Such libraries are not merely neutral structures, but repositories of actively hierarchical social and cultural difference, and thus complicit in what Robert Bringham calls “once familiar claims that art and poetry or culture and morality are exclusively the property of city-dwelling Christians with a certain shade of skin” (36). Even the rigorous order of the library implies a worryingly authoritarian tendency, its strictures symptomatic of an abnormal or desiccated life too far removed from the natural world the library seeks to mirror. *Middlemarch*’s Dorothea Brooke, for example, constrained in her marriage to the pedantic scholar Casaubon, becomes spatially and symbolically “shut up in the library” (326). Even imaginary or abstract libraries can and should be questioned: Edward Said speaks fluently of the institutional “library or archive” of Orientalism (41), itself a collection of organized and preserved information used to legitimate stereotypes on a gross scale.

Binaries will only take us so far, so I would suggest another general vision or mirage of the library: as a present history of citations; a conference of spectral voices. Here I cite Derrida’s so-called “spectral response” (*Fever* 62): the “voice” of an answering machine, a dead person, a phantom or an author – the library’s haunted codices and silently murmuring stacks. Writing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, library historian J.W. Clark speaks of the library “as a temple or haunt of the Muses,” a place where “men of past days are not thrust out of sight; their footsteps seem to linger in the rooms where once they walked” (7). Jorge Luis Borges writes of what he calls books’ “enchanted spirits” stored in

the “magic chamber” of the library (*Seven Nights* 76). Resting on the library’s shelves – or in the corridors of the mind – these spectral voices require only the “magic” of a reader’s attention to speak again. Manguel sets forth the spell, as it were, claiming that “[o]nly when the able eye makes contact with the markings on a tablet, does the text come to active life. All writing depends on the generosity of the reader” (*History* 179). Through such activity the reader is granted the power “to see with the eyes of others and speak with the tongues of the dead” while in the imaginative domicile of the library-as-remembrance (*On Reading*, 277). This spell is an essential component of citation: as a summons, or call. Without this “spectral response,” Derrida says, “[t]here would be neither history nor tradition nor culture... This is, also, the archive” (*Fever* 63).

## 1.2 DEFINING THE LIBRARY; DEFINING THE ARCHIVE

With these general representational strategies in mind, it seems necessary to extract a stable definition of “library,” a difficult endeavour dependent on our definition of “archive.” Historian Michael Harris argues that traditionally the terms “library” and “archive” have been relatively interchangeable and only recently made distinct (3). However, though the terms must to some degree remain fluid, some etymological differentiation seems helpful.<sup>2</sup> “Archive” derives from the Greek verb *arkhein*, meaning “to begin” and “to be in first place, to rule,” but was also used as a noun, in which case it meant *arkheion*, “public office,” or, when pluralized, *archeia*, “public records.” Thus

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<sup>2</sup> For a coherent and brief etymological history of “archive” and “library” see John Ayto.

Derrida writes that, as a verb and a noun, archive carries originary and official authority: it denotes both “commencement” and “commandment,” the record and the office (*Fever* 1). Both meanings inform the word’s definition today. The OED defines the archive as a “place in which public records or other important historic documents are kept”; documents which, Derrida reminds us, “in effect speak the law: they recall the law and call on or impose the law” (*Fever* 2). Such documents are a vital part of the library.

In contrast, the definition of “library” is drawn from the Latin for “book,” a material origin anchoring the term closely with physical objects and precipitating its historical flexibility. Thus the Roman *librarium* simply refers to the concern or employment with books, whether mercantile or academic, public or private. The term has, if anything, broadened in its contemporary meaning as “a place set apart to contain books for reading, study, or reference... in *various* applications *more or less* specific” (OED, my emphasis). A library may be a private room or a book-case, a public building or a commercial institution, even an abstract collection. The last use opens up a second range of imaginary referents where a library may exist as “a great mass of learning or knowledge” or “the objects of a person’s study” (OED). This broad definition permits the collection to include many items material, virtual, artistic, functional, archival, ephemeral, or otherwise.<sup>3</sup> Such breadth admits paradoxes, of which some have already been mentioned.

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<sup>3</sup> In a discussion of what constitutes a house, Robert Harrison writes that “[i]f nothing else, a house is a place to keep books in” (43). Although meant partially in jest, this comment still places the library firmly in

What is common to these multiple uses and definitions? What natural state do libraries aspire to? We must remember that libraries exist to store and preserve books. They are monuments to human memory, guardians of human experience. Crucially, the library must exhibit this collection for study, even if only to an individual or select group. Without such accessibility the library turns into a literary mausoleum, a place where texts go to moulder and disappear. Without readers a book rapidly becomes, in Mallarmé's words, "a tomb in miniature for our souls" (25): a dead object. To further articulate the library's desires – its drives to collect, preserve, order, and expose – I will turn to the common myths that inform libraries, as described by Alberto Manguel.

### 1.3 MYTHS AND ASPIRATIONS

There is nothing accidental in Alberto Manguel's decision to open his recent study, *The Library at Night* (2007), with a discussion of the mythic roots of libraries. Doing so evokes a genealogy richer than history, and articulates deeply embedded beliefs about the

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what Harrison terms the "secular topography where the human mind stores both the past and future" (84); indeed, perhaps the library-as-house is one of if not the pre-eminent spaces in this imaginary geography. Gaston Bachelard certainly intimates as much in *The Poetics of Space*, where he writes that "the chief benefit of the house" is that it "shelters daydreaming... protects the dreamer... [and] allows one to dream in peace" (6): following Harrison, I would suggest that libraries necessarily allow such dreams the power to traverse time. They are, in short, the places where memory's achronically organized time is assembled and re-experienced by humans living through time; they are where memories live.

library. Manguel invokes two fundamental systems of symbolic difference, the first diurnal and the second mythological. Each is worth discussing briefly to elucidate Manguel's insights into library behaviour and aspirations.

Manguel's first method of examining differences among libraries and library behaviours fixes on a diurnal distinction split naturally by day and night. Each time favours a certain epistemology of the library, and by extension a different way of seeing order. The day-time library, an ostensibly rational period, is perhaps more recognizable:

During the day, the library is a realm of order... The structure of the place is visible: a maze of straight lines, not to become lost in but for finding; a dividing room that follows an apparently logical sequence of classification; a geography obedient to a predetermined table of contents and a memorable hierarchy of alphabets and numbers. (*Night 13*)

This description elucidates the rich and productive possibilities of the library as a rational structure clearly discernable under the bright morning light. Comprehensibly ordered, the library provides its readers with an environment conducive to study and understanding, these being the guiding lights of the well-lit library. However, the logical processes of categorizing and regularizing texts inevitably demand new or refined methods of classification as they attempt to account for further or more exact details, for in truth no two books are exactly identical: each material object has its own history. A proper classification system, like a well-mapped geography, will accommodate idiosyncrasy up to an arbitrary point, at which it must cease to represent difference. Thus



Manguel writes that “order begets order,” because “no cataloguing method... is ever closed unto itself... the possibility of continuing is always there” (*Night* 39-40). In part this is also what Derrida calls the archive’s fever, for Manguel’s daytime library “follows an *apparently* logical sequence” (my emphasis): its superimposed system is logical only unto itself. Any abstract geography proves unable to map all complexities, when applied to the plethora of discrete textual identities within the library, just as jagged marks or contour lines on a map can in no way correspond exactly to the awesome heights of a true mountain range. Clearly the day time rationalism of the library leaves something to be desired, for its morning-time categorizing disregards, on some level, the fundamentally incommensurate relationship of its ordered system of classification to the texts and objects classified.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps my suspicion of the morning’s clarity and systemic order belongs more properly to an evening attitude, for at night, Manguel argues, the library becomes murkier and less comprehensible. Under nocturnal lights the library’s barely glimpsed definitions encourage a more holistic and irrational epistemology. I do not mean to imply that night is any less congenial to scholarship. On the contrary, I look to

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<sup>4</sup> These impulses nevertheless find devotees in the seekers of a so-called “perfect catalogue,” a text which exactly mirrors the contents of a library in miniature – an object which, in a singular book, contains multitudes. Matthew Battles writes that this line of thinking perpetuates a “reductive danger... [because] if the world can be compressed into a library, then why not into a single book – why not into a single word?” (8) Whether dangerous or idealistic, the daytime urge to endlessly order and classify is a provocative idea, and one I explore more fully in Chapter Three.

Benjamin's quotation of Hegel's famous observation that "only at nightfall does Minerva's owl take flight" (170). Only in the barely illuminated darkness do readers, contravening day's pervasive light and stumbling through barely seen stacks, happen to chance upon this volume or that, guided by shadows and beckoned by largely unseen promises held within the library. This epistemology recognizes the essential instability belying the rational mandate to organize, order, classify, and catalogue. In "Unpacking My Library" Walter Benjamin affirmatively writes that "any kind of order is nothing but a state of uncertainty, a hovering over the abyss" (162); but conversely, instead of an abyssal gloom, Alberto Manguel sees a cause for celebration: he writes hopefully of "the world's essential, joyful, muddle" (*Night* 14). Whether understood as an abyss or as a joyful muddle, it is difficult not to become aware of the intrinsic and primal uncertainty, even chaos, in the library at night.

Like the day-time library, the nocturnal library has its problems. I have merely to turn off all the lights to forcibly realize that *some* light, some form of clarity and order, is necessary to make sense of the library at night. In true darkness a book may be held but not read: it is rendered incomprehensible, literally unreadable. If, as Manguel says, the library's daytime attitude is a "reasonably wishful order" (*Night* 14) that demands a measure of night's confusion, then the chaotic nocturnal library requires some mitigating illumination. Neither day nor night, order nor chaos, may hold sway over the library.

Setting aside diurnal categories, Manguel suggests a second examination of the library's contradictory nature by proposing two mythic narratives, exemplified by two

renowned and ancient structures, the Tower of Babel and the Library of Alexandria: “two monuments that, it could be said, stand for everything we are” (*Night 19*). He argues that each mythic structure represents the impossible perfection of one of the library’s two fundamental desires: the ability to construct a totalizing unity, and the quest to collect all written expression. Together they provide a distinct set of reference points from which Manguel creates a mythology, a narrative genesis, for all libraries to follow. In different ways each narrative supports the library’s “constant and far-reaching... seemingly contradictory attempts at inclusion and exclusion” (*Night 19*). Obviously no library could achieve either, not to mention both, of these mythological structures’ aspirations; nevertheless, their influence over the library is considerable.

First, the Tower of Babel, the evocative Biblical structure aspiring to the heavens and toward the unity of all humans. Babel arose, Manguel contends, “from our desire to conquer space, a desire punished by the plurality of tongues that even today lays daily obstacles against our attempts at making ourselves known to one another” (*Night 19*). Reaching to the heavens, this immense tower exemplifies the belief in an attainable universal structure, a single order that accounts for and rules over everything. Babel reflects, or at least seeks to reflect, the drive to assemble all human expression, and from its aspirations “in the pre-history of story-telling” (*Night 24*) Manguel traces a formative myth, an iconic archetype for all totalizing collections thereafter that seek to collect and order texts and, crucially, to shape *one* meaning out of polyphonic confusion.

Derrida shares Manguel's interest in the archetypal nature of Babel, but where Manguel identifies the primary aspirations of Babel, Derrida explores the implications of the tower's fall. He writes that Babel is "the myth of the origin of myth, the metaphor of a metaphor," a structure whose narrative of linguistic dispersal through destruction

does not merely figure the irreducible multiplicity of tongues; it exhibits an incompleteness, the impossibility of finishing, of totalizing, of saturating, of completing something on the order of edification, architectural construction, system, and architectonics. What the multiplicity of idioms actually limits is not only a "true" translation, a transparent and adequate interexpression, *it is also a structure of order, a coherence of construct.*

("Des Tours" 104, emphasis original)

With these remarks Derrida also comments on Manguel's association between Babel and homogenizing structures to identify an ineradicable fissure in its aspirations of universal inclusion. The library's desire to "conquer" space and establish a unified repository of idioms within the structures of its catalogue is always challenged by the irreducible multiplicity of languages, texts, and personal expressions. The construction workers – authors, librarians, texts; those who try to order existence – scatter in the fall of this totalizing structure. And yet, despite its fall, Babel's myth continues to inspire libraries in their attempts to make of the world one comprehensive, rational structure.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Babel is a dangerous attempt at totality. Jean Baudrillard writes that humanity "came very close to the perfect crime with the Tower of Babel," since any attempt to homogenize language to facilitate meaning

Manguel turns to the Library of Alexandria for the library's second mythic narrative. He argues that this ancient library exemplifies our desire to halt time and entropy, an aim formative to the library's very reason for existence (*Night 19*). Unlike commercial institutions which store books only so that they might sell them in a routine of accumulation and dispersal, the library seeks to contain its volumes in perpetuity and, thus, to outlast time itself. Alexandria demonstrates the innate generosity of the library, its impossible, radical goal the inclusion of all expression.

In a sense the Alexandrian myth runs counter to that of Babel, for while the Tower sought to homogenize all languages the Library was "built to assemble from all over the world what those tongues [estranged at Babel] had tried to record" (*Night 19*). Alexandria's generosity acknowledges that all books possess a singularity that resists attempts by structures such as the Tower of Babel to reconcile all differences in one classificatory system (*Night 24*). The Alexandrian impulse relentlessly seeks to acquire and discover unique otherness, and to Manguel its explicit ambition – to collect "every written thought" – has become a timeless and powerful revenant, a ghostly promise returning over and again to swear that it is possible to gather all individual voices (*Night*

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strips away "the richness and uniqueness of language" (91): while meaning would be clearly communicated, the means of doing so would be vastly impoverished.

24). Despite its material destruction (three times, no less) the Library of Alexandria stands as a perpetually extended and generous promise.<sup>6</sup>

This continuing promise is vitally important to the human longing for immortality and validation, for if the library could truly collect and preserve everything written then all things, all people

will have a place there, recorded in words by a poet, a storyteller, a historian, forever, or at least as long as there are readers who may one day open the appointed page. There is a line of poetry, a sentence in a fable, a word in an essay, by which [a writer or a reader's] existence is justified; find that line, and immortality is assured. (*Night 27*)

Stored in the timeless library a text is guaranteed eternal “life” and exposure to future readers, who may themselves find epiphanies in the words of others. The library has considerable currency as a metaphoric means of gaining eternal life, justifying the dead and promising future authors the same. Obviously the myth is hopelessly idealistic, taken literally.<sup>7</sup> Still, as a metaphor, Alexandria’s audacity gives it mythic resonance.

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<sup>6</sup> However, we should remember that the Library of Alexandria only collected everything written in Greek, and accommodated select texts from other languages only in translation.

<sup>7</sup> As if the disjunction between ideal hopes and practical prognoses were not enough, Matthew Battles cynically notes that the Alexandrine library probably mouldered to pieces before it was burned, unusable because of linguistic barriers between the books’ ancient Greek and the population’s polyglot mix of Coptic, Aramaic, Hebrew, Latin, etc (32).

Manguel argues that all libraries intrinsically share the aspirations of Babel and Alexandria. Every library “however small, is a universal library in potentia [sic],” he says; “every book declares its lineage of all other books, and every shelf must admit its helplessness to contain them” (*On Reading* 273). The paradox – that a library is particular *and* universal, perhaps miniscule *but* potentially vast – resides in the objects it collects, the inexhaustible expressions it tries to preserve, and in its drive to collect, an occupation that, while often circumscribed by circumstance and necessity, has no natural terminus. All libraries participate in these myths, because all books invoke them:

Everytime a reader opens a book on the first page, he is opening the countless series of books that line our shelves from the morning on which writing was invented to the last afternoon of the future. It is all there, every story, every experience, every terrible and glorious secret. (*On Reading* 273)

#### 1.4. LIBRARY ETHICS: ORDER, COLLECTION, PRESERVATION, STUDY

From these mythic aspirations we can trace how the library’s common and contradictory nature recurs in its representations. First, however, I should discuss the political and ethical elements of the library to avoid the “mistake” of regarding the library as a “neutral space” (*Night* 108). The purposes of individual libraries have just as often been eccentric as rational, as exclusive as inclusive, a tendency deriving from a central tension in the

library's necessarily paradoxical philosophy: it may never be universal, nor eternal, despite its strivings. Wayne Wiegand shows that libraries have developed to suit very different historical interests and mandates. Whether in the interest of providing so-called useful knowledge, entertainment reading, or nationalist literature, libraries have functioned as dominant institutions, itinerant services, and private endeavours. And yet, across differences of intent, geography, and customs, all libraries share what Alberto Manguel deems

the explicit will to lend concord to our knowledge and imagination, to group and to parcel information, to assemble in one place our vicarious experience of the world, and to exclude many other readers' experiences through parsimony, ignorance, incapability, or fear. (*Night* 18)

Interwoven with the salutary aspirations of the library are elements that must be called terrible. For every library there exists a shadowy inverse: "the endless shelves of books unchosen, unread, rejected, forgotten, forbidden" (*On Reading* 35). Censorship forbids; memory fragments, then forgets; collections officers pass over; and time simply does not grant the freedom it ought. No library, despite aspiring to order and comprehend the universe, can realize its idyllic goal.

I should emphasize that libraries privilege certain perspectives and methods, and that their collections are products of selective practices and a limited purview. Libraries reflect what Derrida calls the nomological exercise, "the hermeneutic right and competence... to interpret the archive" (2), once possessed by *archons* but now by



librarians. The library's strategic organization and ordering reflects and exerts such nomological power; it commences and commands, as does the archive. Books are assigned places upon the shelves, and associations are made or discouraged by proximity and place. A select few are always given some form of prominence. One of the first demonstrable exercises in canon formation was the result of ancient librarians who "decided to assist their readers" by selecting, glossing, and cataloguing "all manner of important works... [and] authors who, in their opinion, surpassed all others in literary excellence" (*Night* 111); here, as ever, what begins as "assistance" often becomes dictation, or imposition.

Even so, such authoritative exercises are essentially unavoidable. Derrida argues that "there could be no archiving without titles (hence without names and without the archontic principle of legitimization... without order and without order, in the double sense of the word)" (*Fever* 40). Certainly, the library's Babellian project of systemic order and categorization privileges, imposes, and institutes hierarchies and relationships for readers to navigate, but just as no library is perfectly collected or consumed, no one system of order serves flawlessly. "Ultimately," Manguel argues, "every organization is arbitrary" (*Night* 43). Librarians' inevitable biases, as individuals with particular perspectives on texts and categories, perform the library's violence – organization by any method – and translate "the chaos of discovery and creation into a structured system of hierarchies or a rampage of free associations" (*Night* 61). Yet, were they to give in utterly

to the threatening chaos, libraries would quickly become unapproachable and inaccessible; thus the need for nomological exercises reinstates itself.

By directing its make-up, collection policies also influence a reader's participation in the library. Despite Alexandria's mythic generosity, libraries have from their very inception responded to their patrons' wishes by selectively collecting items to preserve and study. Paradoxically, although the contents are assorted and selective, the claimed rationale for libraries often gestures back toward universal inclusivity: touted as monuments to their wealthy and powerful patrons, libraries often assert a vast reach and storage – the library as a conspicuous “expression of earthly power” proof of wealth and stability (*Night* 110). Who are the patrons? Wiegand argues that libraries tend to identify with the social power and interests of the upper and middle classes, accruing texts to suit, but other mandates also shape library collections, whether public, academic, national, or individual (533). Regardless of the determining body, each decision to limit a library's acquisitions influences a reader's choices, and because they must grow by selective accumulation, since every inclusion implies exclusion, libraries occupy a perpetual state of hesitation. Some find this disquieting, even mournful: Manguel writes that “[t]he library of the mind is haunted by the knowledge of all the books we'll never read... by all the books that never made it into the circle of the librarians' elect” (*On Reading* 284). Although choosing means temporarily discarding, absconding from this choice means the reader's retraction from the library itself: not choosing is to disclaim books entirely.

The choice of books, from purchaser down to reader, inevitably but necessarily constrains the library's idealizing desire for universal availability and comprehensive selection.

Acting against the many influences in the library seeking to predetermine reading – organization, classification, and selection – are certain inherent library processes.

Discussing activity in the library space, Wiegand argues that libraries have historically function[ed] as places where multiple interpretations and appropriations of texts were made possible, since no external authority could mandate a uniform interpretation of any text read in solitude. (534)

By its nature, reading is a solitary and private act, lending it strength as a site of resistance.<sup>8</sup> Reading itself may be forbidden and books may be censored but, Manguel argues, reading even a single sentence allows the reader “the possibility of reflecting upon the sentence, of acting upon it, of giving it a meaning” (*History* 281). Citing diverse historical precedents, Manguel writes that the power of reading derives from its potential “to interpret, associate and transform” (*Night* 91). He specifically recalls Talmudic and Islamic scholars who assert that knowledge is not found in the materiality of books, but rather “in the experience rescued from the page and transformed again into experience” (*Night* 91). With this power a reader may effectively read against the library's contents.

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<sup>8</sup> Although to say that it lends strength to the private individual is not to say that it may determine any one response. Benedict Anderson has powerfully argued in *Imagined Consciousness* that even private reading acts cohere to create national consciousness: “the novel and the newspaper,” Anderson writes, “provided the technical means for ‘re-presenting’ the *kind* of imaginary community that is the nation” (25).

Although the selection and placement of books may be manipulated, the reader alone holds the power of understanding and reacting to the books of the library.

Further, the library's nature resists attempts to restrict its contents through selective collection or classification, paradoxical as this may seem. Manguel argues that a library "is an ever-growing entity; it multiplies seemingly unaided... by suggesting gaps through association, by demanding completion of sorts" (*Night* 56). Any text invariably invokes multiple others: readers can read more of an author's books, observe historic or thematic continuities, respond to the chance resonance of words and emotions, or even reconstruct a new text by the glyphic symbols of the old. By collecting any text, the library must face the question "but why not another...?" Any perceived space is a flaw for, as Manguel writes, "like Nature, libraries abhor a vacuum" (*Night* 66). Absence implies something uncollected and unpreserved, something unavailable for study: a failure, in other words, of the library. Walter Benjamin has keenly observed that "writers are people who write books not out of poverty but out of dissatisfaction with the books they could afford but do not like" (164). Following this intuition, books are arguably a writer's attempt to fill perceived gaps in library collections, efforts to supply a voice and a name for the things that, hitherto, went silent and nameless.

Any presumptive ordering agency also finds resistance in the library, for as Derrida recognizes there are "so many uncertainties or aporias for whoever claims to set a library's contents in order, between the library and what's outside it, the book and the non-book, literature and its others, the archivable and the non-archivable" (*Geneses* 18).

Italo Calvino's short story "The General in the Library" (1995) fluently represents this difficulty. The story narrates a general who enters a library with the "suspicion... that books contained opinions hostile to military prestige," and is thus tasked with meticulously censoring the offending books (13). His biblioclastic project stalls when upon beginning to read he discovers that the ideology he endorses is unappealing and even incomprehensible: the many books complicate or refute his beliefs. In his report to his superiors the general is opposed at all points to "those ideas considered beyond discussion," although he is still slightly confused, "as can happen with those who have only recently embraced new ideas" (17). Of the library's influence, just as of the general's mental about-face, "there could be no doubt" (17): the library drastically influences those who attempt to restrict it, should they heed its contents. Such consideration is, however, not always given, and the book-burner's logic has been aptly if apocryphally phrased by Caliph Omar I, whose judgement of the Library of Alexandria resounds in the pages of history: "If the contents of these books agree with the Holy Book, then they are redundant. If they disagree, then they are undesirable. In either case, they should be consigned to the flames" (qtd. in Manguel *Night*, 117).<sup>9</sup> Unlike Calvino's general, such biblioclastic logicians care little for the contents of the library.

Finally, the library's books paradoxically trouble its desire to "lend concord" to our experience. Rephrased in mythic terms, the incredibly diverse collection of

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<sup>9</sup> Borges and Manguel propose that the Caliph sanctioned the final destruction of the Library of Alexandria. Classicist Lionel Casson cites other scholars' arguments that sharply disagree.

Alexandria disrupts Babel's system of total unity. Derrida argues that texts within the library are "[b]igger and stronger than the libraries that act as if they have the capacity to hold them... they derange all the archival and indexing spaces" (*Geneses* 15). In other words, every book assumes an importance greater than its catalogue entry; its being transcends its description. Furthermore, physical space does not equate actual importance, and the library's books gain and lose their "size" upon the shelf according to the ever-changing perception of the reader-seeker in the library. Acclaimed texts distract from the lesser known books around them, while immediately sought objects obscure others by a sense of pressing need. It is common to pass by shelf after shelf of "unwanted" books while seeking a certain shelving code and a chosen book determined by prior consultation with the library's searchable catalogue. Although we might claim that every book is ostensibly contained by the library, affixed to its shelf by a rigid code, held accountable in a catalogue, and even chained to a desk, in truth each book transcends this ordered system in the eyes of interested readers. In any largely homogenous collection one dissenting voice acquires a power unequal to its physical size. By this method, and those previously discussed, the library resists attempts to determine its influence on the readers who read its books.

### 1.5 WHAT LIBRARIES, HOW AND WHY?

Situated amidst these general arguments lie the various representations of libraries in fiction, an assembly I have previously called “bewildering.” However, as this brief discussion of libraries should indicate, it is only their range that is bewildering. The library’s essence is certainly approachable, despite its internal contradictions. In the interests of clarity and precision, not to mention manageability, this thesis will concentrate on certain texts to demonstrate how various representations consistently express the library’s nature. These texts are gathered with an eye toward presenting a unified picture – they are all contemporary works, published roughly in the last half-century – but also with an eye toward diversity. The connection between all these works is neither geographical nor national; rather, it is the perception and representation of a central topic: the idea of the library, represented in fiction.

The first chapter reads Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges’ “The Library of Babel” (1941) in counterpoint with Sri Lankan-Canadian Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* (1992). These two very different texts present what seem like radically oppositional visions of the library. Borges’ nightmarish short story tells of a world that literally is the perfect and total library: universal, impervious, and eternal. In contrast, Ondaatje’s historically situated novel touches on not one but seven libraries, each of which is secluded, imperfect, and dangerously vulnerable. I contend that these two representations nonetheless retain an essential commonality. Both are committed to discussing the library as a structure that works to order and collect our collective experience, and both see the inherent tensions that complicate this structure. Each text

simply isolates a different moment at which to represent the library. While Borges sees in dream-like clarity the impossible perfection of the library's naturally inhuman project, Ondaatje narrates the continuing human impulses that draw us to libraries. Both agree that the library is the imaginative and physical location where the disparate things of life are ordered and preserved, but while the one dreams the project's end, the other sees that this project is not only necessary, but endless.

The second chapter will examine British author Ian McEwan's representation of the library in his recent novel, *Atonement* (2001). For one character, Briony Tallis, the library supplies the generous promise of a future reconciliation, a bringing together of memories. The library is, in effect, the witness and the guarantor of Briony's efforts at atonement; it is a textual assemblage where she might return her voice to harmony with those she has wronged. McEwan's novel uses the library differently for two other characters, the lovers Robbie Turner and Cecilia Tallis. In the library they find a metaphorical beginning place for their love, and a metonym of their shared cultural heritage and personal history: it stands *in* as a physical presence in their lives, but it also stands *for* a shared tradition that they are able to use to express their love for each other, even in difficult times of separation. Finally, libraries in *Atonement* serve the prosaic purpose of providing material for various narratives and space for characters to perform and transform themselves, safe in the library's generous sanctuary.

The third chapter returns to Borges in the company of Canadian author Thomas Wharton. I study Borges' "The Book of Sand" (1975) in conjunction with Wharton's



*Salamander* (2001) to closely examine the closing footnote to Borges' "The Library of Babel," which suggests an at first implausible idea, based on a simple progression: that the distilled collection of lived experience in the library's stacks may also be contained in a solitary book. In short, this idea posits that the universe is meant to conclude in a single volume, an infinite catalogue which Borges calls the Book of Sand and Wharton the *alam*. Both narratives are obviously fantasies, and I explore the implications of this generic choice on their treatments of the condensed ultimate library – the infinite book.

## 1.6 PURPOSES AND INTENT

We must pay extraordinary homage to this institution [the library]. We must acknowledge it as the prestigious and sole depository of copyrighted publications, certainly – certes – and of hallowed archives. But this keeper of the past's noble heritage is also, as it happens, because of its very traditionality, the bold and prophetic fore-keeper, I dare say, of masterpieces to which, despite all the resistances I have noted, a future is promised. Such a fore-keeper is vital for the Omnipotence-other of literature.

Jacques Derrida, *Geneses, Genealogies, Genres, & Genius*

Derrida's words speak for themselves, but mine may not have been as clear, and so it is appropriate to say what this study will not do. I do not propose to assemble a history of libraries, nor will I describe the library's working mechanics, everyday management, or minutia: this is not a study immediately concerned with the "library sciences" or the social history of the library. There is already a considerable body of work in these fields to which I gratefully acknowledge my debt; in particular I owe much to the accessible

work of Matthew Battles, the erudition of Lionel Casson, and the scope of Michael Harris and Wayne Wiegand. I have briefly engaged with the library's philosophy and mythic origins in this introduction to elucidate a consistent understanding of the library that will, in turn, enrich my examination of a library's appearance in a narrative text. As I have endeavoured to describe, the library is a potent and complex emblem of a paradoxical nature – simultaneously particular and universal, polyphonic, represented easily and often, and always full of meaning. This study applies this understanding, gleaned from library historians and the observations of Alberto Manguel and Jacques Derrida, to a select grouping of texts. From these narratives I hope to illustrate recognizably distinct treatments of the library, while at the same time demonstrate the commonality underwriting these representations. It is my further hope that this study might aid readings of other texts which represent libraries, and that I may in some small way help to illuminate a representation common and complex, interesting and always remarkable.

I take as my guiding light the fictive librarian Margarita Staples, a vivacious character of China Miéville's delightful children's novel *Un Lun Dun* (2007). Staples' name gleefully combines office stationary with tropical libation, and her self-proclaimed job description cogently presents the paradoxical complexities of the library that so often make it compelling. "Extreme librarian," she calls herself; a seeming oxymoron: "bookaneer." A symbol of boredom and privilege, excitement and resistance; a product of our collective memories and experiences: the library commands our attention.

## Chapter Two: Twin Libraries

At the most we gaze at it in wonder, a kind of wonder which in itself is a form of dawning horror, for somehow we know by instinct that outsize buildings cast the shadow of their own destruction before them, and are designed from the first with an eye to their later existence as ruins.

W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*

The library stands as a monument to order, culture, and humanity but, as I have argued in the introduction to this thesis, it may be constructed with very different prejudices, or viewed through very different gazes. Naturally, therefore, libraries have been represented very differently in works of fiction. However, all representations share a commitment to discussing or demonstrating the tensions at the heart of the library: order and chaos; collection and omission; preservation and decay; access and exclusion; and so on. To establish some conception of the representational range of libraries, this chapter examines two prominent fictional libraries which oppose each other in almost every aspect possible, and yet remain true to their fundamental commitment to the library's ontology of paradox. I intend to convey an impression of how, in the most disparate of library representations, order is always disorder, fragments always constitute unity, and monuments are always destined to be ruins.

The first text, Jorge Luis Borges' "The Library of Babel" (1941), presents a "total" library: universalized and externalized; eminently public; a structure not only beyond the

comprehension of its librarians, but beyond the very life-span of humanity. It is, in short, an unthinkably gigantic space, and there is literally no thing beyond its collection. The second text, Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992), explores the private library of a ruined Italian villa in World War II – a fragile and even vulnerable collection, with limited resources, and shaped by private usage. In contrast with the Library of Babel's universal accessibility, this particular construction is available only to a few characters who retreat from the pervasive, seemingly universal war. It is this remove, this retreat, which makes the villa's library useful and even desirable, while the universality of the Library of Babel makes its inhabitants question not only the library's existence, but their own. If the Library of Babel constitutes the universe, then the Italian library provides a sanctuary, a place outside but accessible to its surroundings. It resists the narratives of war and rupture that otherwise dominate the characters' lives, offering instead a retreat into other times and experiences via its collected books. However, the library space is not hermetically separate from the war, and is still dangerous, in and of itself: the books and shelves bear an explosive potential. Finally, Ondaatje's text presents not just one library but a group of libraries, a healthy variety of collections which, taken as an aggregate, interweave order and chaos, unity and fragments; Borges' text presents a "total library" whose nightmarish universality casts its world in terrifying absolutes.

While Borges' and Ondaatje's representations of libraries are radically different, they both illustrate the central paradox of a library's being. Their shared nature, consistent over such cataclysmic differences, emerges when we pursue a basic question:

*how* and *why* does the library as a symbol of order and collection emerge in each narrative? Articulating these texts' differences across their underlying commonality gives some sense of how the library's polyphonic nature works in discrete fictions; it also goes some way toward explaining W.G. Sebald's intuition that a monumental structure promises its own eventual ruin – an intuition that must also hold true in reverse, for ruins remember their monumental status. If the nightmare of Borges' total collection foretells the ruin of humanity, then the ruined libraries of Ondaatje's text illustrate a ghostly recollection of the unified monument, and however ghostly, however ruinous, they still represent voices as yet *not dead*: voices of books held in the library and voices not yet entrusted to the library's continuing promise. Only when the library ceases to be read and the ruin ceases to be perceived is the monument truly destroyed. "Libraries burn," Ondaatje's text laconically remembers (238), but even in memory the collection, the imagination of the collection, lingers on. Only forgetting is destruction.

## 2.1 BORGES' NIGHTMARE

If I were asked to name the chief event of my life, I should say my father's library.

In fact, I sometimes think I never strayed outside the library.

Jorge Luis Borges, *Autobiographical Essay*

"Borges and the library": the theme seems excessive.

Lisa Block de Behar, "The Place of the Library"

### 2.1.1 “The Total Library”

It is difficult to disentangle the biographical reputation of Borges from the literary tropes of his work. In this regard, “The Library of Babel” is highly significant for, as the epigraphs to this section indicate, Borges consistently proclaimed his appreciation for libraries. His biography could conceivably be told in a series of episodes centering on different libraries: his father’s library, his schools’ libraries, his personal library, his work in the Buenos Aires Miguel Cané municipal library, and his tenure as Director of the National Library of Argentina.<sup>10</sup>

However, Borges’ relationship with the library was more complicated than a simple yearning for its familiarity. Writer and critic Edwin Williamson accentuates the complexity of Borges’ relationship with the library by emphasizing a biographical tension. Williamson claims that the library was a counter to strident ancestral claims made by Borges’ mother – demands Williamson calls “the sword of honor” – but also a soporific influence that risked total detachment from the vivacious debate of life. In his recent biography, *Borges: A Life* (2004), Williamson writes that

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<sup>10</sup> The persistent connection leads Jaime Alazraki to comment that, like Borges’ creation Asterion, a minotaur who chooses to remain in his labyrinth (“The House of Asterion), Borges “has made a similar choice: confronted with the chaos of the world he chose the order of the library... he anchored his writings in the order of the intellect, in the charitable waters of the library” (3). Alazraki perceptively aligns Borges’ carefully organized writings with the library’s structural order.

[Borges] would come to regard his father's library as a metaphor for the solipsism that afflicted him for most of his life. The library, after all, was a mixed blessing – on the one hand, it helped him preserve a certain freedom of the imagination against the oppressive authority of the sword of honor, but, on the other, his prodigious reading served to aggravate his self-absorption and reproduce the dream-like subjectivity from which he so desperately wanted to escape. (41-2)

Borges himself later articulated his feelings of ambivalence toward the library when discussing his appointment as director of the Argentinean National Library. Calling it “the strange irony of events,” Borges admitted that he

had always imagined Paradise as a kind of library... There I was, the center, in a way, of nine hundred thousand books in various languages, but I found I could barely make out the title pages and the spines. (*Seven Nights* 110)

It was a cruel irony. Borges, the devoted reader and occupant of libraries, was losing his sight, losing the power to recall the spectral voice of a book from its printed page. This loss reiterates the mixed blessings of libraries for Borges. What would have been a pleasurable responsibility turned into the frustrating curation of nearly a million books he could not himself read. Borges would later repeat his ambivalent feelings about the library, admitting in a personal letter that he felt as if he had “never emerged” from his father's library (qtd. in Williamson, 429). And, to an extent, this observation is true: he

had, after all, moved from his father's library to his nation's, from patriarchy to patrimony, thus demonstrating a consistent affinity with the idea of the library, the place and the impulse.

Such lifelong familiarity visibly translates into Borges' prolific literary endeavours. The library is a subject of many of his poems, essays, reviews, and short stories, but the narrative text that gives the library most prominence is unquestionably "The Library of Babel." A short story first written while Borges worked at the small Miguel Cané library, it was published in *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1941). However, Borges had previously published a short essay, "The Total Library," in the *Sur* of August 1939, which anticipates the subject to appear in the later short story. It is well worth exploring this essay, Borges' first discussion of the idea of a truly universal library.

Characteristically, for Borges, the essay begins with a logically puzzling statement: he writes that "the fancy or the imagination or the utopia of the Total Library has certain characteristics that are easily confused with virtues" (214). From this incisive statement he goes on to detail the "total library," what Williamson describes as

the idea that, given a sufficiently extensive period of time, a limited number of letters or symbols would generate a finite number of combinations and, consequently, of books. This library, therefore, would



contain all the books that could conceivably be written and would describe everything that existed or could possibly exist in the universe. (238)<sup>11</sup>

Such an idea, while obviously antithetical to the now-redundant creative writer, is nevertheless a viable interpretation of the library's natural dimensions; indeed, it carries these dimensions to their extreme logical conclusion.<sup>12</sup> The total library represents the exhaustive collection and preservation of all books, all ideas, and all arguments possible in their finite combinations. It would, Borges realizes, be "of astronomical space"; therefore he shrewdly calls it an "inhuman library, which chance would organize and which would eliminate intelligence" (216), reminding us that the library's organization is always arbitrary, especially when it is determined without apparent agency or a clear nomological authority. The two constituents of this total library – eternity and spatial sprawl – aptly fulfill Alberto Manguel's contention that all libraries inherently wish to conquer space and time, for the total library inexorably does both. In the essay Borges glosses over details of preservation and access, content to simply postulate the rudiments of this massive institution, a library that radically displaces itself through the axes of space and time and, by doing so, becomes a perfect representative of the library.

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<sup>11</sup> In the essay Borges explicitly discusses the popular theory that, given enough time, "a dozen monkeys provided with typewriters would... produce all the books in the British Museum" (215). Ever the elegant logician, he provides a footnote suggesting that, "strictly speaking, one immortal monkey would be sufficient" (n.215).

<sup>12</sup> Critic John Sturrock calls this idea "the dystopia of a literary man envisaging the totality of literature, the moment when it all has been said" (103).

Apropos of the items collected by the “utopia[n]” library – mobilizing the term’s full ambiguity, not as a “good place” but as a “no-place” – Borges readily acknowledges the wondrous possibilities available in the collection. Literally everything would be assembled by this library, items whimsical and scholarly, far-flung or familiar:

the detailed history of the future, Aeschylus’ *The Egyptians*, the exact number of times that the waters of the Ganges have reflected the flight of a falcon, the secret and true name of Rome, the encyclopaedia Novalis would have constructed, my dreams and half-dreams at dawn on August 14, 1934, the proof of Pierre Fermat’s theorem, the unwritten chapters of *Edwin Drood*, those same chapters translated into the language spoken by the Garamantes... (216)

Clearly the prospect of studying such texts, of simply gaining access to this collection of knowledge and culture, holds dizzying ramifications. However, Borges knows that this library simultaneously circumscribes itself, paradoxically precluding study and order by its total inclusivity. Mindlessly, the sheer accumulation of objects destroys whatever benefit may be found in the total library: for *everything* would be collected.

Everything: but for every sensible line or accurate fact there would be millions of meaningless cacophonies, verbal farragoes, and babblings. Everything: but all the generations of mankind could pass before the dizzying shelves—shelves that obliterate the day and on which chaos lies—ever reward them with a tolerable page. (“The Total Library” 216)

These deflating remarks remind us that Borges is not setting out to valorize the “total library.” Such an object is, he says, “a subaltern horror” (216), a repressed and threatening image and a dreaded concept that, however impossible, haunts his creative mind. Yet Borges knows that these characteristics are paradoxically “easily confused with virtues” (214), for the library naturally desires to enlarge and preserve its collection, usually beneficially. It is only when this desire is taken to its utter extreme that it shows such adverse effects. These ideas in Borges’ “The Total Library” strongly inform his subsequent short story, “The Library of Babel.” Indeed, the latter could reasonably be argued to perform a fictional continuation of the ideas first expressed in essay form.

### 2.1.2 “THE LIBRARY...”

“The Library of Babel” opens with a famous statement, a subverted norm that immediately catches the eye within a commanding sentence:

The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite, perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries. (113)<sup>13</sup>

Many readers forget the hexagonal galleries,<sup>14</sup> but the idea of a universal library without spatial or temporal boundaries is powerful, and the narration’s brusque self-assurance

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<sup>13</sup> I will be citing from Hurley’s translation, despite Manguel’s distaste for it (see *On Reading*). I have also cross-checked my references against the translations of James E. Irby and Anthony Kerrigan.

<sup>14</sup> With the prominent exception of critics Bloch de Behar and Bloch, who ascribe them great significance.

lends the statement authority – and the library its capital L. Some few amenities lighten the construction of this immense edifice, but the library’s vast nature truly startles the mind. The narrator asserts “axioms” and “fundamental laws” to articulate what John Updike calls the librarian’s “history of philosophical speculation” (74), a history that establishes the Library as truly universal. These “axioms” are, firstly, that “*The Library has existed ab aeternitate,*” and will therefore enjoy a “future eternity”; secondly, that “*There are twenty-five orthographic symbols*” (113), discounting numbers, capital letters, and punctuation other than the comma and the period; and, thirdly, that “the Library is ‘total’ – perfect, complete, and whole – and that its bookshelves contain... all that is able to be expressed, in every language” (115). With vast powers of total collection even the wanton destruction of books is as nothing, abetting the Library’s preservation efforts (116). Provisions for access and study are universally implemented, and the Library’s amenities are “equipped, apparently, for [the librarians’] convenience” (Updike 74). Finally, rounding out the four dimensions of any library, the Library’s basic order is completely random: if Benjamin is right and order is only a “hovering over the abyss” (162), then the Library’s complete disorder reveals the incomprehensible abyss in all its multitudinous shelves.<sup>15</sup> A truly total library, the Library collects all volumes ever possible for study and preserves them in a state of confusion, recognizing the chaos at the heart of any so-called rational system of ordering.

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<sup>15</sup> Bloch justly argues that this “unimaginable” collection of books is “maximally disordered” (22, 116).

However, the Library of Babel is also a nightmare, its abyssal confusion a dark realization of the library's natural drives.<sup>16</sup> Despite its seeming accessible comprehensibility, in the sense that it includes all texts, the Library is perfectly incomprehensible: it firmly resists human understanding. The librarians may read the books, but they are frustrated in their search for meaning. Paradoxically, this failure does not preclude Manguel's claim that libraries fundamentally desire to conquer space and time – having the mythic aspirations, or the “mad dream[s]” of Babel and of Alexandria (*On Reading* 273). Borges' library nightmarishly realizes these dreams: its sprawl constitutes the universe and its constitution ensures immutability and, thus, immortality.

In such fantastical perfection, however, is a deathly influence on the library's living inhabitants, its human librarians. The narrator understands this sinister aspect of the library's totality: he writes that “the human species – the *only* species – teeters at the verge of extinction, yet... the Library – enlightened, solitary, infinite, perfectly unmoving, armed with precious volumes, pointless, incorruptible, and secret – will endure” (118). These are not idle thoughts; even the narrator is himself “preparing to die” (112). This “total” and “perfect” Library thus illustrates one of the central paradoxes of the library's

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<sup>16</sup> John Sturrock emphasises this critical hesitation, asserting that Borges “asks only that we understand the principles of the Library of Babel, not that we believe in them” (200). However, Sturrock elsewhere claims wrongfully that “the Library is not infinite, it merely exceeds our capacity to compute its size” (101).

Without getting lost in the details, this idea is ably refuted by Bloch, who adroitly manages the computations. This does not mean that it is possible to comprehend the immensely finite collection, which is probably what Sturrock means.

nature, namely that the otherwise laudable desires to acquire and store texts are, when taken to their utter conclusion, monstrous, and implacable. Going beyond its mandate to mirror the world and preserve textual voices, the Library of Babel supplants the world itself. Unfortunately, as the narrator's preparations for death indicate, there is no place for human life in this perfect collection.

### 2.1.3 "... OF BABEL"

The second element of Borges' title references the Biblical Tower of Babel and taps into the vast discussion of the numinous origins of confusion (the divine association that "speaking in tongues" implies, for instance) and Kabbalistic proofs of God.<sup>17</sup> The Library's books, like those of the total library, contain "leagues of senseless cacophony, verbal nonsense, and incoherency" (144). This ineluctably cryptic state of nature signals that Borges' library is the anti-thesis, the nightmare perversion of what Manguel hopefully calls the "ideal library," a tenet of which is that it "disarms the curse of Babel" (*On Reading* 269). The ideal library makes confusion intelligible but, horribly, the Library forces Babel's curse to prominence: its contents visible but mystifying, the Library's obvious secrets are never given away. In a series of abrupt emotional revolutions,

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<sup>17</sup> Jacques Derrida, among others, has presented a compellingly erudite exegesis of Babel's mythology in "Des Tours de Babel." His conclusions are clearly relevant to Borges' tantalizing textual hints toward what I would nevertheless deem a Kabbalistic misinterpretation of "The Library of Babel."

inhabitants of the library accordingly swing from “unbounded joy” (115) to a “disproportionate depression” (116), alternately celebrating the Library’s resources and bemoaning its paradoxical inaccessibility. Understandably frustrated, the narrator complains that “[t]he certainty that some bookshelf in some hexagon contained precious books, yet that those precious books were forever out of reach, was almost unbearable” (116). Unable to find meaning in the gibberish they read, the librarians attempt a Kabbalistic search for codes in the languages of the confusing, but arguably divine, books. Searching for an intelligible hermeneutic, the narrator seizes upon the possibility that “phrases, at first apparently incoherent... hide a terrible significance. There is no syllable one can speak that is not filled with tenderness and terror, that is not, in one of those languages, the mighty name of a god” (117). These books, the narrator argues, inscribe the name of a god that, I would suggest, is Borges’ “deity gone raving mad” from his essay “The Total Library,” for the idea is consistent across the two texts.<sup>18</sup> Fitting with the nightmarish tenor of the total or universal library as a whole, this insane divine creator would be the ultimate absurdity.

To conclude my discussion of Borges, I would recall W.G. Sebald’s words from the epigraph above, specifically his perception of “a kind of wonder which in itself is a form of dawning horror.” The total library, the Library of Babel, is just such an “outsize building.” It is a catastrophically perfect monument and thus the ordered destruction of creativity: for in and after its creation all creative efforts are redundant. The complete

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<sup>18</sup> Of course, as Derrida argues, one of God’s other names is Babel itself (“Des Tours” 105).

records of experience are already completely collected by the Library's labyrinthine hexagons. The Library's "future eternity" is a continuing death of progress and change, for everything has quite simply already been written; already experienced and recorded and forgotten and rediscovered and so on. These texts are available and preserved, but for the convenience of no one. The absence of a proposed reader is unsettling. The library is by this measure not for the benefit of its human librarians, for they cannot comprehend the cacophony of nonsense. In truth there is little meaningful activity left to the humans of this universe. Faced with this monument they confront their own ruin, and to stave off the dawning horror of their insignificance they can only seek their own "validations" amid the volumes of cacophonous nonsense (116) – a futile task, the narrator tells us. Although Borges' dying narrator knows this numinous Library will never be destroyed, it has effectively already ended, and the death of all the mortal librarians tacitly acknowledges its cessation. The library's utter stasis is, ultimately, the true nightmare, the immanent horror of the unchanging and universal Library of Babel.

## **2.2 OF VILLAS AND LIBRARIES: ONDAATJE'S FRAGMENTS**

More than anything, memory resembles a library in alphabetical disorder, and with no collected works by  
anyone.

Joseph Brodsky, "In a Room and a Half."



### 2.2.1 PIECES OF THE LIBRARY; OR, RE-MEMBERING LIBRARIES

Michael Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient* (1992) is a story of things broken apart and the collections that attempt to hold them together. It is also a story about characters affected by war – a corollary to the library as chaos is to order – and the ways in which history and identity overlap and intersect, how texts and bodies intertwine. When the title character, the burned patient known as Almásy, asks “am I just a book?” (253), the question goes unanswered, but poet Joseph Brodsky intimates an answer when he intuits that memory, the shaper of identity, “resembles a library”: self-identity comes from the libraries of memories within us, those diffuse and fragmentary histories and experiences. Identity and textuality; textuality and history; history and identity: all influence and are influenced by the various strategies of collection that bring together their compositional fragments. Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, like Borges' “The Library of Babel,” revolves around the library as a crucial ideological structure, but Ondaatje emphasises the vivacious and on-going act of collection, not the finished and deathly assemblage. His library is the Italian villa San Girolamo turned hospital during the closing days of World War II, a refuge, of sorts, for the characters harbouring within its walls. San Girolamo's sanctuary reminds us that a library is “a place set apart” (OED) by its books, ordering processes, and readers; it is an almost hermetic system of comprehension and understanding that comforts escapees from the chaos of war. Although it is hardly

universal, the villa's library nevertheless provides an essential space to its readers where they may, by the healing act of recollection, recover from the war.

The library provides an opportunity and the resources to explore the assembled memories and experiences of others, and a way for the characters to re-collect their own identities and experiences. Ondaatje's library is a site of order and collection set apart from the widespread fragmentation of identities and bodies, and in its refuge from war's destruction readers are able to come to terms with their traumatic experiences, a space the English patient calls the "well of memory" (4).<sup>19</sup> Crucially, this re-collection functions best during the time between the clear order of day and the obliterating abyss of night: it is, in other words, most successful under moonlight. It is also important to remember that the healing of re-order can only occur once bodies, memories, and libraries are already devastated by chaos: a necessity that explains why the villa's library begins the novel as a ruined monument, devastated and open to recollection and re-collection.

It is necessary to first recall that a library is not always defined by physical boundaries, or by its collection's materiality. There are libraries without walls and without named identities, and more ways to see libraries than by obvious architecture or explicit nomenclature. *The English Patient* explores these alternate, intangible possibilities concurrently with the physical libraries it represents – like Babel's dispersed languages, libraries are scattered throughout Ondaatje's novel, sanctuaries of polyvocal collection

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<sup>19</sup> Amy Novak recognizes that the villa's inhabitants "seek to cope with their traumatic experience by drawing the event into a narrative space that will contain or position the past" (207),

and recollection. Together they signal the availability and importance of the library's space apart, the refuge able to preserve and collect: an essential site for understanding and reinterpreting experience and identity. Cumulatively, the plurality of library spaces – some ruined, some remembered – make up an ordered, if abstract, area diametrically opposed to the raging conflict of war, one which proclaims its collective and essentially fragmented nature. From these apparent ruins Ondaatje creates a monument called a novel, a mutable collection of his own.

It is slightly misleading to say that the library forms the center of *The English Patient*, for Ondaatje's novel does not exclusively center itself on any single named library. There are instead multiple libraries presented, a brief itinerary of which is useful to show their ubiquity in the text – though most are only entered once, and many exist only in memory. We are first introduced to the San Girolamo library where Hana goes to find books to read to her patient (5); a small second library appears in the villa shortly after, a collection of books “[s]tacked in one corner of [Almásy's] bedroom” (93). Politziano's library, a third and properly historical library, reminds Almásy of other libraries burned by Savonarola in the Bonfire of the Vanities (57-8). A fourth library is briefly prominent as Caravaggio, reeling from torture, walks “past Brunelleschi's church toward the library of the German Institute, where he knew a certain person would look after him” (59), thus curiously bypassing religion's traditional sanctuary in favour of the ordered stacks. Another scholarly library, the fifth, appears as Almásy reminisces that, when not in the desert, he was “with Madox or with Bermann in the Arab libraries” (153).

Kip explores a sixth library, Lord Suffolk's, but cautiously "touched nothing" (187).

Passing reference is made to the seventh library, the city archives of Naples which burn as the Nazis destroy "the richest collection of mediaeval records in Europe" (276). Eighth, and most mysteriously, Almásy describes watching Katherine and Geoffrey Clifton's first meeting "at two a.m. in the Oxford Union Library," describing his perhaps instrumental role in helping the two students meet (258). These are but the explicitly named libraries. I will not attempt to account for each. Rather, I take my cue from this abundance to think toward a cause of the broad importance *The English Patient* places on collections and assemblages, memory, and places set "apart."

The many physical libraries in the text gesture toward the more abstract collections of memory and experience. This is most clear in the case of the English patient, whose copy of Herodotus' *Histories* is a library composed of personal fragments, newspaper clippings, and, of course, Herodotus' text. Hana also experiences the need for a personal library, but hers is internalized. She "fell upon books as the only door out of her cell," to the extent that they "became half her world" (7) – thus forming a private collection of memories, an internal library. Even bodies can be recognized as libraries of information, texts to be assembled, read and interpreted. Almásy's lover Katharine reads voraciously, seeing Herodotus "as a window to her life" (233) and collecting "everything about the desert... even... marginal articles" in an attempt to know Almásy better, but also to create an internal library through "self-education" (230). Hana uses her parents "like authorities in a book" (268), while Almásy's knowledge of arms and armaments is

exploited by the Bedouin in “a museum in the desert” (20) where he is called the “white translator of guns” (23), a telling use of a man who claims to be filled with “information like a sea” (18), and whose life “has been governed by words... rumours and legends ... [and] Shards written down” (231). Identity is translated recursively, as if it were text: Hana’s “translation” into a new identity gives Caravaggio pause for thought (222); Almásy realizes that he has “translated [Katharine] strangely into [his] text of the desert” (236), his attempt at knowing who she is contingent on understanding how she fits into his world, his desert text; Kirpal Singh is “translated into a salty English fish” (87), a violent misreading by the British that turns his identity into an object, transmuting a young man into a familiar fish.<sup>20</sup> Knowledge passes from book to body and from text to identity in this novel where Hana can “stare at [a] word in a novel, *lift it* off the book and *carry it* to a dictionary” (128, my emphasis); where she can “enter” a story “knowing she would emerge from it feeling she had been immersed in the lives of others, in plots that stretched back twenty years, *her body full of sentences* and moments” (12, my emphasis). Hana’s way of reading abnegates time and space to fuse self and text and thus classifies her identity as a collection, a library, of memory and experience. However, traumatized and disordered, Hana must go back to books to recollect herself: Caravaggio finds her “trembling. Needing... this half-finished book in order to collect herself” (31). To her “shell-shocked” (41) and disrupted identity the book holds symbolic power, its textual assemblage able to grant order to a confused existence. Almásy also reads from his

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<sup>20</sup> Novak sees that “[i]t is not simply his name that is altered, but his ontological status as well” (220).

Herodotus to better understand the world around him and even writes important knowledge back into its text: the book emblemizes but cannot totally capture the life of the man who collected it. Identity and self are collections, if not co-terminal, then covalent. To the English patient's searing question to Caravaggio – "am I just a book?" (253) – and its corollary, that the body and identity of a character are "[s]omething to be read" (253), the novel answers yes.

Threaded throughout these collections of flesh, memory, and paper are thematic oppositions – chaos and stability, fragments and unities, disorder and order – united by vulnerable bodies damaged by war: Hana's internal library/identity, the patient's text, the mental state of other characters, and the Girolamo library itself. The English patient's body is destroyed; his "thick, soiled book" (118) is not much better off. Hana resides in a similar state of shock, and finds her transformative method of reading reduced to passive observation: a book lies lifelessly "on her lap" while she examines "the porousness of the paper, the crease at the corner of page 17 which someone had folded over" (7). Unable to actively read the text, limited to the tactile recognition of "brush[ing] her hand over its skin" (7), Hana's traumatized state weakens her ability to resurrect the printed voice.<sup>21</sup> As Hana's reading tendencies indicate, and to a lesser extent Almásy's use of Herodotus, the borders between books and bodies lose definition under trauma: both are similar collections of memory vulnerable to chaotic disruptions, and both need healing.

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<sup>21</sup> Hana risks losing the transformative power of reading as it converts spectral voices to new experiences through active remembrance, as discussed in the introduction of this thesis (17-18).

Fragmented and palpably linked with human bodies and consciousnesses, Ondaatje's libraries seem to be the opposite of Borges' Library of Babel. They are fragmented, scattered, and small, while Borges' library is universal, omnipresent, and unified. And yet, the collections in both texts cohere around the way order shapes chaos, and how preservation staves off time's decay. *The English Patient* goes so far as to present its libraries, its repositories of memory, as key structural aids for identity. If the library was for Borges *the* universe, but one chaotically ordered, then for Ondaatje ordered libraries form an *other* universe, an ordered complement to a chaotic landscape that demonstrates a consistent impulse to heal and recollect, to make from fragments some form of unity. Each text's representation accommodates the central paradox of the library: that it is, ultimately, an interwoven skein of ordered disorder and disordered order; a fragmented collection of collected fragments.

### 2.2.2 IDENTITY, MEMORY, AND THE LIBRARY: COLLECTIONS

"While in reality all that I am is of a piece: all of a piece, and yet broken up into a myriad of souls. Does that make sense?"

John Banville, *The Untouchable*

"I'm putting things into place"

Almásy, Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*

But what are the libraries useful for, and what do fragments of others' experiences provide the traumatized refugees of war? This question is itself interrupted by the nature of the libraries to hand, for the collections of *The English Patient*, unlike those of "The Library of Babel," are incomplete. From this deficiency new complexity takes shape, inflected by the library's abhorrence of conspicuous absence. Incomplete collections invite participation, and thus procedures of collecting, especially as they define and articulate identity, form an essential part of Ondaatje's narrative.<sup>22</sup> The ongoing process of collecting influences writing, plot, and characters alike, and gives further prominence to the library, symbol of order and collection. Libraries are where pieces and fragments are assembled and given to the reader whose cry might be Caravaggio's: "We want to *know* things, how the pieces fit" (121). In this struggle for knowledge – of self and others – a library is the collection integral to the recollection: it offers new frames of reference but also, most importantly, identity's renewal.

The desire to collect and form libraries takes shape from the wide spectrum of partial inventories in need of completion – collections of identity, narrative, architecture, and infrastructure; "gaps of plot like sections of a road washed out... missing incidents as if locusts had consumed a section of tapestry, as if plaster loosened by the bombing had fallen away from the mural" (7). The plot, the road, the tapestry, and the mural are all composite entities with identities formed of events and places, threads and images. Here

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<sup>22</sup> This aspect of the library is clearly extraneous to the Library of Babel, for that collection already contains everything possible, and its librarians are unconcerned with the acquisition of fragments of knowledge.



it is crucial to connect the library's provisions for order and collection with the stability of personal identity. As Stephanie Hilger observes, in their "attempt to redefine their identity, the characters turn to books" (38), repositories of otherness in a war where the characters had "no defence but to look for the truth in others" (Ondaatje 117). Hana exemplifies this search: she is, Cory Lavender writes, "pierced by literary shrapnel" (129); certainly, Hana's reading leaves "her body full of sentences" (Ondaatje 12), perforated like the many soldiers she has seen. But there is an important distinction here, for Hana's "shrapnel" fails to kill her but instead imparts to her the experiences of others. Some books, such as Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* and Kipling's *Kim*, allow Hana to vicariously experience cultural shock; others resurrect the strange ghosts of history for her, the spirits of Tacitus's *Annals* and Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma*. In the library's holdings Hana seeks the broad stability – albeit punctuated by moments of radical difference – of others' narratives of struggle and change to reassure herself that her wartime experiences are not solely her terrible burden, and to fill gaps in her self-knowledge. Hana's disruption and search for textual otherness is a prominent example of how a character may cope with trauma by piecing herself together.<sup>23</sup>

Linguistic expression is also subject to the gaps riddling the library and the road, the body and the mind. Hana recalls that her father Patrick loses "syllables out of shyness," each of his sentences missing "two or three crucial words" (90). Patrick isn't

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<sup>23</sup> The effect is demonstrably successful, as Hana evinces when she playfully calls herself "the Mohican of Danforth Avenue" (224).

alone: Almásy also “speaks in fragments,” while his identity’s textual supplement – his copy of *The Histories* – contains “other fragments—maps, diary entries, writings in many languages, paragraphs cut out of other books” (96). In a moment that inevitably recalls the library’s protest against time we are told that, after Almásy’s death, “[t]hey will burn everything except the book” (286). His written thought lasts beyond his physical presence in the shape of a library-in-miniature, a reflection of his identity and “[h]is only connection with the world of cities” (246). However, such a textual legacy both represents and twists his identity; it can only imperfectly present his life to its readers. Almásy observes this kind of linguistic play when comparing his reservations about language and speech with Katherine’s opinions:

She had always wanted words, she loved them, grew up on them. Words gave her clarity, brought reason, shape. Whereas I thought words bent emotions like sticks in water. (238)

Together Katharine and Almásy are correct, for words both clarify and distort. They help to shape and order identity, but they also create and leave hidden gaps and mysterious fragments, the distorted evidence of the life they try to reflect.

Responding to its many fragmented identities, *The English Patient* demonstrates a rich variety of collections and collectors. The first method of collection is simply to physically gather texts, objects, and fragments: examples here include the library of San Girolamo, built by previous owners and augmented by Hana; and Almásy’s copy of *The Histories* “that he has added to, cutting and gluing in pages from other books or writing in

his own observations” (16).<sup>24</sup> Almásy’s additions, like Hana’s hidden marginalia, make his “commonplace book” a personal library, a near-impenetrable labyrinth of fragments and observations (58). These physical collections are both obvious and useful, but their materiality makes them not only accessible but also vulnerable to external force – Hana, opening books “too fast,” imagines herself “breaking some minute unseen series of bones” (222); meanwhile the gaping holes in the villa’s walls silently attest to their fragility and remind us that a book’s body, like a person’s, is a fragile thing.

A mirror image of this vulnerability constitutes the second type of collection presented by *The English Patient*: the individual as collection; identity as library. If the physical library is vulnerable to physical violations then the human psyche is just as open to the disturbances of another’s voice. While Hana and the English patient are conspicuous examples of identity-as-collection – subject to the verbs of being read, translated or recollected – it is Kirpal Singh who is most conscious of how identity can be read and misread, disturbed and penetrated. In a memorable speech decrying the colonial textual influence on his heritage Kip explodes with frustration:

I believed I could fill myself up with what older people taught me. I believed I could carry that knowledge, slowly altering it, but in any case passing it beyond me to another. I grew up with traditions from my

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<sup>24</sup> With so many additions and substitutions the book is “almost twice its original thickness” (94), but even before Almásy got to it Herodotus’ *Histories* was a “travelling library,” in the words of explorer Bermann, whose reports supplied Ondaatje with historical material (qtd. in Provençal, 4).

country, but later, more often, from *your* country. Your fragile white island that with customs and manners and books and prefects and reason somehow converted the rest of the world. ... Was it, as my brother said, because you had the histories and the printing presses? (283)

Kirpal's strong reaction exposes his distrust of books and foregrounds the role of texts in colonial expansion;<sup>25</sup> however, it also illustrates the degree to which Kip's identity is itself a composite, a hybrid collection composed of traditional knowledge, his brother's angry criticisms, and colonial culture emanating from the "fragile white island." By carrying, altering, and passing along these fragments, Kip makes insubstantial words ineradicable parts of himself; from these linguistic pieces he collects his identity.

Jon Saklofske argues persuasively that *The English Patient* metatextually demonstrates a third form of collection. Claiming Ondaatje as a type of authorial collector, Saklofske notes that the novel is itself a collection of historical oddities and imaginative figures that, like Herodotus' supplemental history, resists dominant narratives. Instead it is a subversive account emphasizing traditionally forgotten and unrecalled fragments: "the cul-de-sacs... of history" (119). *The English Patient* is an "ambitious anthology of intersecting collections" that "communicat[es] Ondaatje's awareness of himself as a collector figure," Saklofske writes; "Ondaatje's prose is a ruptured container out of which his preserved yet altered collections spill" (80). Almásy

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<sup>25</sup> Alice Brittan stresses this relationship's importance and writes that Kip's accusative outburst "is guilty of a historical exaggeration but not a useless or unforgivable one" (202).

and Herodotus are thus resurrected from history and Hana and Caravaggio recalled from *In the Skin of a Lion*. These assembled characters are themselves united by the subversive thrill of collecting, recollecting, and remembering. Saklofske writes that

Hana pulls books off shelves and adds fragments... Kip interrupts circuits and currents. Caravaggio is a thief, an amoral collector. The English patient's sole possession is a copy of Herodotus' *The Histories* "that he has added to, cutting and gluing in pages from other books..." (Ondaatje 16). ... Herodotus himself, recreated in a portrait by Almásy, is described as "one of those spare men of the desert who travel from oasis to oasis, trading legends as is it is the exchange of seeds, consuming everything without suspicion, piecing together a mirage" (Ondaatje 119). (81)

These characters' assorted desires not only exert personal agency but also mount a public challenge to the archive's nomological authority. While Ondaatje writes a collection made of historical fragments, his characters echo this behaviour by instituting multiple personal collections, thus changing themselves and their circumstances. The narrative collectively bursts at the seams, exploding with the multiple presence of otherness.

Enshrined in a novel, these voices and fragments are bestowed with importance "the way a stone or found metal box or bone can become loved and turn eternal in a prayer" (261). Identity, the library, and narrative all demonstrate the desire to order and collect the fragments left by history and war. "We are communal histories, communal books," Almásy says; "We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have

swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have climbed into as if trees” (261). He is right – but he leaves untold the survival of a text and the way his book will outlast his body, the way that communal books and stories are entrusted to and preserved within the guarded collection, the monument of the library that, unlike the wind-scoured sands of the desert, remembers.

### 2.2.3 THE ORDER OF THE EXPLOSION: THE LIBRARY’S DANGEROUS PARADOXES

They talk about a staircase that nearly killed them—some steps were missing.

Jorge Luis Borges, “The Library of Babel”

I have said that physical libraries gesture toward an abstract concept of the ordered collection, but this does not mean I may easily elide the importance of physical libraries within the text, and the San Girolamo library in particular. One of the many striking images from *The English Patient* comes in its opening pages as Hana responds to the villa’s structure, damaged by soldiers. Ondaatje’s matter of fact prose underwrites his subject’s symbolic implications, and the passage is worth quoting:

The staircase had lost its lower steps during the fire that was set before the soldiers left. [Hana] had gone into the library, removed twenty books and nailed them to the floor and then onto each other, in this way rebuilding the two lowest steps. (13)

The didactic “how-to” narration supports the event’s practical implications – that books, no matter their theoretical utility, may be put to eminently physical use. The replacement of two missing steps causes another absence; the practical completion of stairs to the floor above causes a conspicuous hole on the library’s shelves, but this is a necessary trade-off in the recovery effort. Hana’s action illustrates the unexpected practical value of libraries, in accord with their symbolic role as what could be metaphorically termed steps to a higher end: here the architecture of knowledge is replaced by that of an Italian staircase. While her action certainly violates the library’s mandate of preservation, Hana mitigates this act by what she does not do, namely, commit the biblioclast’s ultimate sin and burn books for warmth – though “most of the chairs had been used for fires” (13) as had much of the other rooms’ furniture (14). Hana resists this history’s incendiary logic; her construction creatively, not flagrantly, destroys the library. As such it emblemizes the fragmented and violated – but still usable, and essential – collection of libraries in Ondaatje’s text.

On the whole, the villa’s library is conspicuously like “[e]verything else... damaged and in pieces” (32), a ruined symbol of order that bears the marks of chaos. Punctured by a “bomb crater [that] allowed moon and rain into the library downstairs” (8), the trace of a war in which “there was no reason” (50), the library reveals its own explosive potential. Entrants to the library risk, Barbara Harlow notes, “pencil bombs hidden in metronomes [and] bombs attached to the spines of books” (180). Although Hana fearlessly “ha[d] no qualms about the dangers of the possibly mined library” (13), perhaps she should have,

for Caravaggio later sees Kip defusing mines there (74). And yet, despite this danger, the library's nature transcends its damaged architecture.

What is first notable here is that the bomb crater allows nature to invade the library's walled sanctuary, illustrating the essentially vulnerable nature of its artificial construction. While some might argue that the rain-soaked books betray the library's preservation efforts, we must also recognize that Ondaatje employs a symbolic mode of expression that is more metaphorical than strictly logical. Therefore, although rain exposes the library's preservation as fraudulent – a reminder that despite the Library of Alexandria's staunch resolve to conquer time its collection too was lost to fire, damp, and neglect – the intrusive rain reveals another, more important, aspect of the villa's library: despite the inevitable depredations upon the library's collection, it still functions as an active repository of memory and experience, one attuned to the natural world. The library “adapted itself to this wound, accepting the habits of weather, evening stars, the sound of birds” (11). Aligned with organic life, accepting natural depredations, the artificial order of the library is clearly distinct from the novel's other notable technology: the menacing threat of ticking bombs and atomic destruction. The library's project of order and collection is, by contrast, harmonious with the natural world.

Indeed, far from being disabled by the vagaries of weather and open air, the library still functions as designed for the villa's inhabitants, most of whom read from its shelves and all of whom regularly inhabit its broken walls. In a slight twist, although the San Girolamo library's books are “predominantly Italian” (221) the novel claims poetic



license to assume that there are also a number of English books for the characters to read. This implicitly acknowledges the library's claim to Alexandrian comprehension (the library contains all the necessary books), while also emphasizing its post-Babel status (the library as a ruin). From this limited but convenient collection Hana often reads books and brings others to read to her patient, while Caravaggio also steps in to read the books he calls "mystical creatures" (81). Kip alone does not read from the library as he "did not yet have a faith in books" (111), despite Caravaggio's thought, upon witnessing a formal dinner's uncorked wine bottles, that Kip "must have picked his way through some etiquette book in the library" (267). Useful for more than its books, the library also provides a much used living space where Caravaggio, like Hana, "spend[s] most afternoons" (81). More than a living space, it provides a space for playing beneath the moon, the lunar face a witness to the erotic hide-and-seek game played by Hana and Kip. Directly after this, the library also observes, in darkness, their intimacy, as Kip "turns off her [reading] light" (225).

That the library's utility goes beyond study is clear. Hana, in particular, makes good use of the library's generosity and promised preservation, for as Alice Brittan observes, Hana writes in books "that she plucks from the villa's library" (208). These personal jottings are written in "the blank page at the back" of *The Last of the Mohicans* (61), "the flyleaf in [*Kim's*] last pages" (118), and, finally, "between two sections in a book of poetry" chosen "at random" (209). Hana's marginal writings come closer and closer to integration in the original texts as her familiarity with the library's purposes increases.

The marginalia itself is “fragmentary and enigmatic but not cryptic,” Alice Brittan writes (208), and while Hana’s additions to the library’s collection are certainly not designed for ease of reading they are nevertheless stored and not destroyed, kept in the library’s promised eternity. Like the villa whose apparent ruination protects its inhabitants from brigands (14), the library continues to promise sanctuary for the texts entrusted to it even when those texts are enigmatic and the library itself is damaged.

Just as the library itself transcends such physical limitations, the dangers of its collection go beyond physical or visible explosions. Although the narration emphasizes the dangerous heritage of war within the library – its broken walls and bombed books (75) – Cory Lavender argues further that “the explosions that annihilate books can be countered by... the nature of books themselves” (127). Before they are “physically destroyed,” he writes, “books exist as the ruins of their own explosive natures” (127). The library’s books carry a dangerously unpredictable payload of ideas and knowledge, their textual shrapnel shooting out into their readers’ mental spaces and identities in what Lavender calls “the book’s ruinous presence” (129). Ondaatje’s narration agrees and goes so far as to warn readers that although books may “open with an author’s assurance of order... novels commenc[e] with hesitation or chaos”: readers should prepare to be “never fully in balance” (93). This hidden violence is inscribed in the library, a reminder that, while providing an ordered space apart from war’s chaos, it also holds an explosive potential. Kip’s mistrust of books is well-founded and Almásy, for his part, should perhaps have paid greater attention to the shock of unpleasant information within

Herodotus.<sup>26</sup> This admission of violence – the volatility of seeming quiescence – betrays another paradox in the library’s nature in its collection of conflicts: its organized disorder.

With these paradoxes apparent (ruined but functional; a sanctuary with explosive potential) the text recalls the fundamentally conflicted nature of the library, the location “set apart” from war that nonetheless perpetrates a violence of its own. However, as the final, nuclear demonstration of war’s wholly destructive violence illustrates, the library’s natural artificiality (another paradox) is distinct and reclaimable: the library, unlike the bomb, is reconcilable with the natural world. The library’s urge to order and collect is, in other words, organic and even necessary. However, this usefulness should not be sanitized of its violence. The relationship between library and war cannot be reduced to a simple binary in which one stands for peaceful order and the other for destructive chaos. Books produce their own disruption, volatile and irreducibly other: they are always intrusive, these voices of otherness. Yet they are also necessary, as Hana finds, for in the written thoughts of strangers she discovers comfort, co-feeling and shared experience. In this fluid interplay between order and chaos, explosions and reconstruction, the library ably accommodates such actions as Hana’s constructive book-mutilation, and Almásy’s commonplace book: evidence of the complex nature of Ondaatje’s representation of the

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<sup>26</sup> Alice Brittan perceptively recognizes that, because of his intensely selective reading practises, Almásy ignores the lessons Herodotus relates about war. Avoiding the shock of this unpleasant (to him) information, Almásy goes so far as to mutilate his book, pasting over these relevant passages (Brittan 207).

library. The library is simultaneously the ruin of history and the monument of history; its contents heal their readers just as they offer an explosive potential.

#### 2.2.4 MOONLIGHTING

In the dark, with the windows lit and the rows of books glittering, the library is a closed space, a universe of self-serving rules that pretend to replace or translate those of the shapeless universe beyond.

Alberto Manguel, *The Library at Night*

What we call the day prevents me from seeing.

Hélène Cixous, "Writing Blind"

This would be an excellent place to end my discussion of Ondaatje, and yet an odd and seemingly minor thing happens in the first pages of *The English Patient*, when the bomb penetrates the library's walls. This odd thing strongly resonates within the text; it marks a powerful theme. Moonlight enters the room. And with that, quite simply, everything we think of the library in the text must shift to accommodate this elementary illumination. It is by light that we see and make sense of things, that we organize and order, collect and recollect – and yet the villa's library in *The English Patient* is emphatically a night-time library. From this early moment light is a privileged element of the novel's descriptive vocabulary. Even in the daytime the library experiences an "afternoon darkness," illuminated only by a "jagged mortar circle that looked onto the sky": even at this

brightest time the library is only in “half light” (11). The most notable form of light here is lunar: the reoccurring moonlight that presents the library with recursive consistency in what Manguel calls the “muddle” of disorder, as we continue to return to the library at night (*Night* 14). It is “at night” when Hana reads to her patient (5) and it is “at night” when plaster, another casualty of war, falls from the mural (7).

What is significant about the association of libraries and reading with darkness and moonlight? This question accompanies another: why are Ondaatje’s libraries so often shrouded in night? (Or found in the cloudiness of memory?) This feeling extends to the act of reading, such as Hana’s by the fitful illumination of the moon and a candle “flicker[ing] over the page” (5). The novel’s focus on light draws our attention to certain strategies of comprehension: if entering the library is an exercise in sight and perception, then shadows subvert the rational behaviour of the well-lit library. The realm of imaginative supposition presented by Ondaatje’s text, so different from the axioms and principles of Borges’ Library, reinforces the fragmentary nature of memory, that constituent of identity so often collected and recollected. Where Borges’ text was ostensibly clearly defined and eminently logical – a thought experiment turned narrative, a dream of perfection turned nightmare – Ondaatje’s text of memories and impressions blurs, rather than conquers, the boundaries of space and time.

Perhaps this is why the novel strongly links lunar presence with a renewal of life, or a bringing-to-life. Only the “[m]oonlight across the foliage on the walls” makes “the trompe l’oeil seem convincing” (31). This moon-induced vivification stands in stark

contrast to scenes such as Almásy's recollections of Cairo, where after an intense meeting with Katharine he records "sunlight pour[ing] into his Cairo room. His hand flabby over the Herodotus journal... the pen sprawling as if without spine. He can hardly write down the word *sunlight*. The words *in love*" (156). The exhaustion here strongly contrasts with his previous memory, the "night of [Katharine's] insistence," a time of "hot moonlight" (157). The difference partially stems from the opposition of passionate Katharine and rigid Almásy, he a desert lover so awkward in the city and she an English city-dweller: their relationship is typified when Katharine stands "in shadow, and [Almásy], as if unaware of the harsh sunlight, stood in it" (152). However, the lunar theme is broader than this relationship alone: the diurnal mythology of day and night saturates the entire novel. Under the harsh desert sun life withers and dries; beneath the desert moon life begins anew.

The archetypal disorder of night engenders an equally mythic life-giving influence associated not only with the moon, but also with dreams. Hélène Cixous writes that "[b]etween the night and the day there is a long vivacious but fragile region where one can sleep even while being awake" (140). In this dreamlike realm *The English Patient's* characters occupy the half-lit library, and the space of recollection in general, a space already susceptible to reverie. If, as Anne Carson writes, sleep is "a glimpse of something *incognito*" (20), then being on the borderland of sleep is to be able to take this glimpse of the hidden and apply it, seemingly illogically, to rational daytime existence: an activity that renews life by rethinking it. Hana best exemplifies the revitalizing influence of this

imaginative realm: “[m]oments before sleep are when she feels the most alive, leaping across the fragments of the day” (35). Infused with holistic connections and chance remembrances, Hana’s nightly recollections support her daytime life. Indeed, to her the day “seems to have no order until these times, which are like a ledger for her, her body full of stories and situations” (36). Finding order in the confusion of night, bordering on but not falling into dream, Hana’s mind heals by re-collecting and reorganizing those “stories and situations” of life and the library: an essential activity for a shell-shocked nurse who must come to terms with post-war life.

For the thief Caravaggio night is a time of open chaos when, as Hana says, “the weak can enter the strong” (82). In other words, night is when Caravaggio’s amoral collecting is most successful. During this time of uncertain navigation he purposefully collides with people “at the moondial. Disturbing them at two a.m. as a whole bedroom cupboard came crashing down by mistake. Such shocks, he discovered, kept them away from fear and violence” (82). These unexpected collisions at night prompt lively responses. Caravaggio is not alone in his navigation of the night’s confusingly blurred boundaries, and two a.m. is not significant only to a thief and those he steals from: at “[t]wo a.m.” Hana enters Kip’s “night tent” under “a sieve of moonlight” to hear him breathe (130), and it is “at two a.m.” when Almásy claims to have witnessed Katharine meet her future husband Geoffrey Clifton “in the Oxford Union Library” (258).

Like *The English Patient*’s closing scene, Almásy’s story of the Oxford library begs examination but frustrates conclusions. Perhaps we must suspend strict logic and adopt

the night's signature dream-logic to better understand the strange tale. Is Almásy truly present? In the same way that we, the reader are: yes and no. He places himself within the story, but this doesn't guarantee the so-called authentic experience. The fabulous episode (in the sense that it is literally a fable) is likely dreamt by Almásy and related as authentic, a personal fiction masquerading as history. However, definitive answers are unavailable, for the scene lacks delimitation; only its ambiguity is clear. The scene bristles with oddly defined moments in a largely unreal nocturnal tableau.

I should recapitulate the moment: Almásy recalls watching an encounter between two drunk students late at night in a library; he definitively re-collects the scene after associating his own "ghost" with several Egyptian deities, all spiritual guides (258): it is a ghost story where he plays the spectral role. Almásy is speaking in the villa, but his story recalls the words he said to Katharine before she died; thus this is a second recollection, a revenant narrative, a ghost story of a ghost. Perhaps not a fireside, but a deathbed, story. Almásy withholds contextual details and describes certain objects with dreamlike clarity: coats "strewn on the floor" mark a mysterious celebration; Katharine has "bare feet" and her "left hand holds a long loop of pearls" (258). The plot is simple. Two students meet by chance, alone save Almásy's watching spirit, but there is no explanation for the circumstances, for the lateness of the evening, for the place or for Almásy's presence. Is Almásy present? The story blurs the observer's identity by suggesting multiple, similar entities: the observer was "the spirit of the jackal who was the 'opener of the ways,' whose name was Wepwawet or Almásy" – whoever is watching, he is male and given an "I" and



an eye (258). These are the details Almásy gives up, these and the wall “covered in books” (258).

What is clear from the moment’s intensity is the connection between lovers-to-be: they attempt “enthusiastic small talk,” and intuitively recognize “the more permanent worth and pleasure of the other” (258); Almásy says it will be “a whirlwind romance” (258). However, like an inverted Cinderella, when it is time to leave Katharine discovers a shoe’s absence – a shoe Almásy spies and supplies to her, observing the indentation of her toes upon it. She thanks him and leaves without seeing his face (258). Is this contact genuine, signalled by Almásy’s keen observation of details; does this even matter? The memory is unquestionably fragmentary, overseen by a jackal with one eye to the past, one eye to the future, and who holds “pieces of the past” in his jaws: the jackal is the ghost of Almásy, holding Katharine’s shoe and our full attention, and the details die with him, uncollected and unreclected. Yet the encounter is given a time and place – the lovers meet within the chaotic disorder of the library at night, holistically navigated, passionate, and alive. Almásy haunts the scene, but it could be that the scene haunts him, engendering itself in his imagination and expressed in the form we read.

Why the library? Because that is where things come together; where things are placed together and given a common name, a supplement to their proper name. The library is a place set apart, not only for storage and preservation but also for healing, for bringing together collections of self-identity, and coherent, although certainly not seamless, states of mind: Hana’s vivifying near-dreams and Almásy’s ghostly narratives.

Why at night? Because it is during night, the Night, in which mythologies, like libraries invariably begin, responses to the darkness of ignorance. Night always comes first. Like the archive, it signals a commencement. First there was night “without form and void, and darkness was on the face of the deep” (*Genesis* 1:2). This is a religious beginning, it is *Genesis*, but it is also a romantic genesis of Katharine and Geoffrey’s love, of Hana and Kip’s intimacy, even of the trompe l’oeil that comes to life in vivid mimicry: all because night sees the pretense of rational order break down to admit inadequacy. It is when the lines between bodies and names run together, when love and books begin. The logic and details of these preludes to intimacy remain secret, private, hidden within the closed space of the library at night. It is enough to take them as they are given: as a trust, a story of love’s beginning in the nocturnal library. Like Hana and Kip in the San Girolamo library, we must know when to turn out the light.

§

There is no meta-archive.

Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*

From Derrida’s assertion that there is “no meta-archive” I take two meanings. The first is, quite simply, that no archive or library exists outside and independent of all others, none has pre-eminency and archetypal sanctity: there is no Platonic library form. No

archive is not stored within another; no archive bears no future promise to another. The idea is revelatory, certainly contentious, but I would pass to another meaning that bears directly upon the extreme oppositions between the two libraries I have just discussed. If there is no meta-archive, no meta-library (for if the library is itself not a meta-archive, then it must be an archive), then there are in truth no hierarchal differences between libraries – instead they occupy a spectrum. From this I would say there is only one library which takes a multitude of shapes and forms, customs and objects. This library is caught at two extreme moments in “The Library of Babel” and *The English Patient*: two different images in the continuum of the library, each of which shows, from a different angle, that a monument can be a ruin, and that a ruin may be in turn a monument. The paradox of the library is that its space is as open to life-renewing, wondrous reverie as it is to the deadened stasis of a horrible nightmare. If literature is the art of calling and of naming, then these two very different representations simply assign one name with different inflections; they represent in two voices an object properly known by one name: the library.

## CHAPTER THREE: LOVING (IN) THE LIBRARY

This time it so happens that a particular library is the setting, it delimits an appropriate theatrical space in which the action occurs.

Jacques Derrida, *Geneses, Genealogies, Genres, & Genius: The secrets of the archive*.

Many of the questions posed by Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) are fundamental to the idea of novel writing. Can a novelist effect change through artistic representation? Do stories, which all people tell, have ethical power? Can a novel be a way to forgiveness? Out of these broad questions comes a novel whose story spans various grand narratives: artistic ambitions, class differences, world war. But *Atonement* is also a resolutely personal novel dedicated to the three closely related characters that form its beating heart: the lovers Robbie Turner and Cecilia Tallis, and the novelist, Briony Tallis. Its arrested love story aligns itself with other famous romances: "Tristan and Isolde... Troilus and Criseyde, Mr. Knightley and Emma, Venus and Adonis," muses one character; "Turner and Tallis" (192). Taken as a whole *Atonement* at once expresses a novelist's reflexive musings and two lovers' passionate tale; it concerns itself with intertextuality and otherness just as much as with its idiosyncratic self. Interwoven with each of these concerns is the figure of the library for, like *The English Patient*, *Atonement* mixes personal with public, order with chaos, and war with the library.

It should not come as a surprise that libraries – personal and public – occupy a place of importance in *Atonement*, a novel that seems to constantly reference other books in its acute awareness of intertextuality, which is part of its narratological reflection on art as artifice.<sup>27</sup> However, the novel is equally conscious of what might be called its place on the hypothetical bookshelf: it anticipates its future reception and textual kin, a secular kind of literary eschatology.<sup>28</sup> Robbie and Cecilia may not care about this promised survival, but they too value the library. For them it provides a coded language, a series of

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<sup>27</sup> The theme of intertextuality and *Atonement* has been amply discussed by critics such as Earl G. Ingersoll, Pilar Hidalgo, Richard Pedot, and Brian Finney, to name a few. Some suggested intertexts include Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, E.M. Forster's *Howard's End*, L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between*, Henry James' *What Maisie Knew*, John Keats' "Ode to a Grecian Urn," D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Rosamund Lehmann's *Dusty Answer*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, I.A. Richard's *Practical Criticism*, Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, and Agatha Christie's country house thrillers; not to mention the interwoven personas of Elizabeth Bowen, F.R. Leavis, T.S. Eliot and the *Criterion*, and Cyril Connelly of *Horizon* fame, or Robbie's favourites: Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Auden's *Poems* and Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*. McEwan is obviously familiar with the British canon, and happy to play with(in) it. For my own purposes, I would simply recall Manguel's dictum that the "ideal library suggests one continuous text with no beginning and no foreseeable end" (*A Reader* 268): a thought clearly implicated in intertextuality.

<sup>28</sup> In my formulation of a "hypothetical library" I rely on Italo Calvino's essay entitled "Whom Do We Write For? or The Hypothetical Bookshelf" (1967). Calvino writes that in general "[a] book is written so that it can be put beside other books and take its place on a hypothetical bookshelf" (81). I feel that the only conceivable place for a hypothetical bookshelf is in the hypothetical library.

reference points that link them across distance and censorship. In general *Atonement* is as much a collection of stories – of characters whose lives are expressed in stories and characters who express their lives as stories – as it is a compelling and unified narrative of its own, and thus it exists both as library and as book. Like its characters Briony and Cecilia, the novel knows very well that “each bound story [is] catalogued and placed on the library shelves” (7). Furthermore, in its acknowledgements, *Atonement* is careful to explicitly note its debt to the real libraries which supply it a measure of authenticity and important historical information. In these three areas libraries form important pieces of *Atonement*’s narrative effect: as a hypothetical or promised collection, as a cultural bridge between lovers, and as a physical entity with valuable stores of information.

### 3.1 *ATONEMENT*(AT-ONE-MENT) AND THE HYPOTHETICAL LIBRARY

I should begin by claiming that McEwan’s *Atonement* never truly emerges from the library. It begins, as it ends, with Briony’s other stories, “catalogued and placed on the library shelves” (7). To say this is to give away the ending, to reveal what reviewers have accusatively and ungenerously called the novel’s “postmodern trick” (Moseley, qtd. in Ingersoll “Intertextuality” n.256). I am confident, however, that a novel is sufficiently unlike fruit that it may not be so easily “spoiled,” and so I will disclose Briony’s revelation given in *Atonement*’s final section, “London, 1999.” We learn that the entire story has been written by a character who has hitherto occupied a central role, but not that of “author.” To be specific: Briony has written *Atonement*. Although critic Earl Ingersoll

calls this an “astounding” and even “explosive revelation” (*Waiting* 158, 159), a careful reader may observe clues as early as the novel’s first sentence, which describes Briony’s propensity for writing. Similarly, her later novella *Two Figures by a Fountain* is the retelling of a familiar scene, and thus prefigures and even foretells the revelation of “London, 1999.” From these prophetic notes we may look to libraries, because if Briony is exposed as the purported author of a metaphysical *Atonement* then her book begins in the hypothetical archive, the Tallis family library which mysteriously contains not only *Atonement* but also the play Briony had written as a child, “The Trials of Arabella” (347). Briony’s *Atonement* thus assumes an imaginary library whose future promise of perpetual storage crucially underwrites Briony’s efforts at atonement. I would thus conclude, as Derrida concludes of Hélène Cixous’ *Manhattan* in this chapter’s epigraph, that the library “delimits an appropriate theatrical space” where *Atonement* plays itself out.

If there is an irony in the fact that I cannot begin to discuss *Atonement* without beginning to speak of its own ending, the cause surely lies in the book’s often ironic and consistently doubled nature. The story often revisits scenes already depicted, a tactic that demonstrates its conscious acknowledgement of craft and simultaneously modulates the narrative’s emotional influence.<sup>29</sup> The most drastic evidence of this technique is the novel’s crucial closing twist, the final revelation which shapes the plot into a perplexing Möbius strip that requires the re-examination of everything previously read.

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<sup>29</sup> A popular saying suggests a given order here – “first as tragedy, then as farce” – but truthfully it is just as likely that what happens once and seems humorous will seem tragic when repeated.

Complementing this thematic focus on misinterpretations, the narrative revisits events to present new details and allow other viewpoints. Although plot events are thus doubled, and sometimes tripled, the words used to describe, judge, and name them differ – a difference that is often profound. A signal example of such narration is the scene that closes Part One, where through her upstairs bedroom window Briony watches police take Robbie away. The reader later re-experiences this scene along with Robbie in bursts of insight and flashes of memory as he trudges through France, and it is only in the final pages of Part Two that the reader is privy to Cecilia’s whispered words to Robbie, lines from Housman that Briony could not have overheard: “*Oh, when I was in love with you, / Then I was clean and brave*” (247). This tactic delays the understanding of a powerful scene; it also provokes questions about the veracity of narrative voices.

The novel generally reflects what its purported author, the elderly Briony, admits in its closing pages: “[i]t occurs to me that I have not traveled so very far after all, since I wrote my little play [“The Trials of Arabella”]. Or rather, I’ve made a huge digression and doubled back to my starting place” (350). Briony’s *Atonement* is a “digression” insofar as it continues to meditate on the effects of Briony’s grievous error in judgement – her “starting place,” the lie she tells about seeing Robbie attack Lola – but at the same time *Atonement* is “a story shot through with real life” (106), a far cry from the childish platitudes of Briony’s early “The Trials of Arabella.” Ironically, Briony had originally wanted to write “the story of a man whom everybody liked, but about whom the heroine always had her doubts, and finally she was able to reveal that he was the incarnation of



evil” (108). She is able to write this story in the end, though it is not Robbie who is the so-called “incarnation of evil” but Paul Marshall, and he is only the ordinary kind of evil: familiar and disgusting, but hardly a demonic “incarnation.”

Before we consider Briony’s novel, I should first define atonement, a word that literally means at-one-ment, and evokes a return to harmony, or reconciliation between parties (OED). It is important to recognize who the parties are in this atonement. Certainly, McEwan’s novel is ostensibly and authoritatively Briony’s: a girl obsessed with propriety who repeatedly characterizes herself as a “prig”; a girl whose fervent “wish for a harmonious, organized world” (5) provides a faith in order and the urge to write stories so that “an unruly world could be made just so” (7); the child so often “lost to her writing fantasies” (19). Able to recognize these characteristics in herself, the elderly Briony-as-writer gives the game away by quickly acknowledging her novel’s “self-mocking, or mock-heroic tone” (38). Ironized but meant in earnest, the story of the atonement – *Atonement* – is eminently Briony’s: it relates her awareness of her alienation from those she loves and lied about, and ironically it narrates how she came to be so isolated. It is “a plot of her development that contained the moment when she became recognizably herself” (39): “recognizably herself”; recognizably alone. The novel plots her separation from and atonement to those she loves.

Who is her atonement with? Who becomes “one” with Briony? As critics have argued, it cannot be those most affected by her crime.<sup>30</sup> Half-seeing a sexual assault of Lola, which the reader later understands was committed by Paul Marshall, and thinking Robbie a “maniac” after reading the letter he sent Cecilia, Briony states that she witnessed Robbie commit the crime. “I saw him,” she testifies; “I saw him” (169). Her lie drives a wedge between the Tallis family, who believe her, and the lovers Robbie and Cecilia, who hate her for it. This separation is finalized by the lovers’ wartime deaths. Her crime’s absolute nature renders it quite simply beyond the scope of her ability to “take it back,” that playground response to ethical transgression. Robbie makes this point in bullet-sharp sentences while walking to Dunkirk, and concludes that a new story about the past will change nothing:

Briony would change her evidence, she would rewrite the past so that the guilty became the innocent. But what was guilt these days? It was cheap. Everyone was guilty, and no one was. No one would be redeemed by a change of evidence. (247)

Briony attributes these words to Robbie to emphasize the past’s irrevocability, although she stops short of narrating his subsequent death. There is, quite bluntly, nothing that can be done to make amends between Briony and the two wronged, deceased lovers, as she belatedly realizes. “If something happened to Robbie,” she thinks, “if Cecilia and

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<sup>30</sup> With characteristic boldness, Ingersoll writes that “Robbie... might wish Briony an unending future in Hell” (“Intertextuality” 255).

Robbie were never to be together... The only conceivable solution would be for the past never to have happened” (271-2): an impossible solution. Sadly, Briony must face the problem of atoning for something that she cannot physically change. At first Briony had childishly thought that the “tragedy was bound to bring [her and her sister] closer” (173), but ironically of course it does the very opposite. Briony’s eternal separation from Cecilia forces her to concede any hope for reconciliation as their relationship deteriorates to a single remembered topic: “Together, she and her sister and Robbie had only one subject, and it was fixed in the unchangeable past” (329). At-one-ment with the dead is possible only in memory, never in physical reality, and by the time “the novel is finally published” Briony recognizes that the novel’s characters “will only exist as my inventions” (350). No, it is not with embodied, living others whom Briony atones – at least, not with them *as such*.

Instead, Briony’s atonement is with her own conscience, the evidence of which enters public memory as a published narrative. *Atonement* shows the atonement between Briony and her memory – of people she once knew and loved – and thus continues her early fascination with narrative order, but enriched by a life of regret and experience.<sup>31</sup> Rather than completely disavowing her earlier attempts at narrative and ethical judgment – her attempts at literally writing order, reorganizing life into an archive of experience – Briony instead learns to write with mature sensitivity and compassion. By telling of her

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<sup>31</sup> Richard Pedot writes that Briony’s story “is primarily represented as remembering, based on a *will* to order memories into a manageable sequence” (158).

narrative and ethical failures, she atones with the only person she is able to: herself. First, she must recognize and come to terms with her identity and prior actions.

Briony's disproportionate sense of self is a central difficulty, as it is this overconfidence which leads to Robbie's false imprisonment and Paul Marshall's escape from justice. A girl who believes that "[r]eading a sentence and understanding it were the same thing" (35) and that "[o]rder must be imposed" (108) has obviously much to learn about reading and writing. Her troubling double standard is well-encapsulated by her thought that "It was wrong to open people's letters, but it was right, it was essential, for her to know everything" (106). The seriousness of this problem is illustrated when her childish pride intersects with the very adult responsibility of standing witness to legal accusations of rape. Briony co-opts her better judgement by too quickly judging what she "sees" according to an incomplete and juvenile narrative that pre-emptively judges Robbie a "maniac."<sup>32</sup> Although Briony is certainly not alone in misinterpreting the actions of others – almost all the characters in *Atonement* do so – Briony's errors in this context

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<sup>32</sup> James Phelan helpfully adds that Briony allows her "interpretive judgement [to be] overrun by her ethical and aesthetic judgements" (328). I believe this combination of ethics and aesthetics forcefully illustrates the power of names: "maniac" is exemplary here, as is "cunt," the word Briony reads in a stolen letter that shocks her into action. Richard Pedot finds the latter word highly significant in the broad context of the novel, and he writes that "young Briony can no more read the word than she can *un*-read it – and erase in the process her first crime: stealing a letter not intended for her. It will behave [sic] Briony the writer, draft after draft, to accomplish both, not by dismissing word and letter from memory, but by re-writing them from the original writer's or addressee's perspective, as her younger self could not have done" (154).

seem most egregious, for they become the official word of law. However, her presentation of Cecilia's and Robbie's differing perspectives of events in juxtaposition with her own not only demonstrates the gravity of their differences, but also signals that hers is an attempt to exonerate, not obscure or disclaim, her errors.

The elderly Briony is very conscious of the belatedness of her record, her "last novel, the one that should have been [her] first" (349). Undergoing at least "half a dozen different drafts," the project has taken Briony fifty-nine years to write (349). Her early story, *Two Figures by a Fountain*, exposes the necessity of this expanse of time and many drafts. Upon the story's rejection Briony sees that its plot was incapable of achieving the task she set it: to "drown her guilt in a stream—three streams!—of consciousness" (302). McEwan weaves a soft criticism of one form of Modernist writing with Briony's harsh self-assessment: posing as Briony, he writes

The evasions of her little novel were exactly those of her life. Everything she did not wish to confront was also missing from her novella—and was necessary to it. What was she to do now? It was not the backbone of a story that she lacked. It was backbone. (302)

To mature, Briony must work through the acts of confession and forgiveness; she writes through the act and, having failed, repeats it to fail better. But to do so she needs the courage to challenge her own interpretations and understandings and realize that some of them are failed or flawed acts. This is why Briony acknowledges her need to atone in the final sentences of her text of *Atonement* (which does not include the supplementary

“London, 1999”). It is only at this point that Briony “knew what was required of her. Not simply a letter [admitting culpability], but a new draft, an atonement, and she was ready to begin” (330). But who will be the audience to this atonement – in what circles will it circulate? Who will judge her atonement successful?

It takes the rest of Briony’s life to complete the final draft of *Atonement*, an end product with at least two audiences: herself and her readers. In the process of writing it Briony realizes that despite an authorial, even numinous, “absolute power” (350), for her “atonement was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all” (351). Elke D’Hoker puts this admission in the context of literary confessions in general, a genre of performative admissions which reveal “what the author has known all along but has kept secret for reasons of guilt and shame” (33). In what comes to be a standard critical line, D’Hoker writes that

Briony finally writes a story that she is prepared to recognize, acknowledge, and defend. ... [B]y claiming this particular story – in which the lovers end happily – as her truth, she achieves a measure of self-acceptance, if not self-forgiveness. Hers, therefore, is an atonement in the sense of ‘reconciliation with self,’ ‘being at one with oneself,’ as McEwan has said in an interview. (42)<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> James Phelan takes Briony’s confession to be McEwan’s, and argues that as Briony atones for misidentifying Robbie for Paul, McEwan atones for “implicitly misidentif[ying] the nature of his narrative up to this point” (333). Unlike Phelan, I see little point in holding McEwan ethically accountable for how

To achieve this reconciliation Briony “has been forced to project herself into the thoughts and feelings of others,” a move Brian Finney sees as “a fundamentally ethical act that emerges as the core component of Briony’s attempt to atone” (*English Fiction* 98).

Briony’s atonement is not for her eyes alone, however. It is also written for the readers she has gathered over her career as a novelist and those who will chance upon *Atonement* in the future. The book is meant for the promised bookshelf in a future library; it partakes in the library’s guarantee to preserve a work for readers to come. Within this audience, as Briony realizes over the course of writing the book, “[n]o one will care what events and which individuals were misrepresented to make a novel” (350). To these foreign readers, even to those readers who ask “what *really* happened?” Briony maintains a consistent lie: “the lovers survive and flourish” (350). This is not the story McEwan gives us, as his inclusion of “London, 1999” reveals, but it is worth exploring.

Why would Briony include this obvious (to us) lie in her “historical record” where she otherwise “disguise[d] nothing” (349)? She offers two different answers, the first of which is rather specious. Briony rhetorically asks, “[w]ho would want to believe that they never met again, never fulfilled their love?” but this is a non-question: she quite simply chose to eschew so-called “bleakest realism” for the happy story of Cecilia Tallis and Robbie Turner, the “spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince” (350). Briony, a woman who “always liked to make a tidy finish” (334), chooses to employ the

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his text may or may not surprise a reader, nor do I agree with Phelan that “we need to ask whether McEwan is speaking directly through [Briony] about his own narrative” (333). This is a question without answer.

hopeful tropes of romance, rather than realism, through which to inscribe her story in public memory (although she does not go so far as to end the novel with a marriage). The second reason she gives claims her decision “isn’t weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and to unite them at the end” (351). In the public realm where all characters are fictitious, Briony grants the memories of Robbie and Cecilia not only the “truths” of a “historical record” – a claim whose efficacy *Atonement* implicitly questions – but also that which she robbed from the lovers: a life together. Crucially, she does not obscure her own role in separating them; Briony refuses to mitigate her own ethical failure. Briony’s *Atonement* is in this sense atonement not only for its author, but also for those its author has wronged. In each case the atonement involves that witness and guarantor of public memory: the shrine of the library to come.

In this public confession Briony’s narrative illustrates another return to harmony – the intangible atonement of a couple with the world’s memory. I am speaking, of course, of Robbie and Cecilia, those separated lovers whose happiness is so casually thwarted by the childish glee of Briony’s self-righteous lies.<sup>34</sup> Each is physically held apart from the other – they briefly meet once, in a coffee shop – as well as from family and friends. Although Robbie’s mother Grace continues to believe in his innocence, the

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<sup>34</sup> Pedot thinks a different authorial atonement is at play, that “McEwan is really trying to atone for the apparent lack of ethical or political commitment in his early works” (151). For simple reasons of scope, I prefer to stick more closely to the text of *Atonement*, and not look further into the body of McEwan’s work.



comfortable existence of the Tallis household is destroyed by the events of that night. Cecilia cuts ties to her family altogether and inspires in Briony a similar choice while Robbie is imprisoned, his name tarnished. While Briony survives the war, Cecilia and Robbie do not. But what of memory? The public function of a novel enshrines its contents within the space of collective memory, and in a book's preservation the library grants its story the sanctity of a valued, cherished, and even transcendental object: the book is a monument gesturing beyond itself. Within this space, Briony knows, the memory of Robbie and Cecilia will never die, "[a]s long as there is a single copy, a solitary typescript" (350). Her choice to enshrine their memories in a book marks their deaths, in a sense, for as Robert Harrison writes: "All of literature's characters, as well as their voices, belong to the order of the posthumous image" (149). Yet this textual death is incomplete, for characters "are also alive to the degree that... they can be seen and heard by us" (Harrison 150): spectral voices in shadowy libraries. Unable to render those she has wronged physical justice, Briony instead memorializes them, activating an aesthetic narrative justice that works outside of time.<sup>35</sup> This memorialisation is, of course, an incomplete and inadequate response conducted from one living being to another.

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<sup>35</sup> This move almost inevitably recalls Keats' "Ode to a Grecian Urn," and just as inevitably inspires mixed reactions. Ingersoll calls it "artistic fascism" (*Waiting* 161) and derides Briony's novel as "self-serving" (162). *Atonement*, Ingersoll claims, "cannot escape the specter of a ghoulish consumption of living and loving flesh to create the fantasy-lovers [Briony] pursued as a child" (Ibid). His reaction falls prey to hyperbole and confuses intangible memory for "flesh"; consequently, it misses an essential point. Briony cannot facilitate the lovers' physical "at-one-ment." Only in fiction can she resurrect the dead.

However, as the two die before Briony is able and prepared to atone, memory acquires unique importance, for it is the sole trace, the last remains, of the separated lovers. They “live on,” so to speak, in memory. It is all she can offer. Briony relies upon the library-to-come in her attempt to bring together the lovers she wrenched asunder, entrusting the memory of their story to the library’s promise to store and make accessible the contents of its collection.

### 3.2 LOVERS AND LIBRARIES

“There was a crime. But there were also the lovers.”

Briony, Ian McEwan, *Atonement*

But what of the lovers? Criticism has tended to marginalize the story of Robbie and Cecilia, or has cast them solely as victims. Although this interpretation is valid, it unfortunately overlooks what I believe is a major element of the novel: the romance. Accordingly, I will examine the two characters as lovers – not just as victims of a childish error and the social mechanisms that perpetuate it.<sup>36</sup> To do so recognizes the strong emotional weight Robbie and Cecilia’s romantic arc grants the novel. John Updike, for

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<sup>36</sup> Briony’s crime is magnified by latent tensions about class and sex. Brian Finney’s *British Fiction* contains an excellent discussion of how Robbie’s working class background conflicts with the Tallis’ upper class aspirations, while Earl Ingersoll’s *Waiting for the End* and Richard Pedot’s “Rewriting(s) in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*” discuss the novel’s complex presentation of sexual psychology.

one, writes that “it is the lovers that keep us turning the page; theirs is the consummation we devoutly wish” (qtd. in *Waiting* 157). More pertinent, perhaps, is the fact that a discussion of Cecilia and Robbie as lovers cannot but reference libraries such as the Tallis family library, where they have not one but two intense emotional realizations, and the cultural archive, which they use to communicate their love. My examination will involve two steps: first, a close reading of the two crucial library scenes – the latter of which Terry Eagleton has called “one of the most adroitly tender, breathtakingly exact cameos of love-making in modern fiction” (qtd. in Ingersoll, “Intertextuality”) – and second, a detailed examination of Robbie and Cecilia’s cultural “library” of English literature. The second library’s shared texts literally provide the lovers the words they need to continue and develop their correspondence. As both a physical space and an abstract collection of reference points the library forms an essential element of Cecilia and Robbie’s romance.

Although many critical accounts make passing mention of “the library scene,” there are really *two* important library scenes. The first comes as a comic preface; a significant precursor to the second, it is, like so many other events, presented twice. Cecilia and Robbie’s first notable library encounter inaugurates their romance and leaves them confused and blushing: seeking a book from the Tallis library, Robbie unthinkingly takes off his work shoes and socks to enter the home (79), an action Cecilia interprets as exaggerated deference “designed to distance her” (26). To Robbie, however, the event signals a first awareness of “his awkwardness in her presence”; he feels “like an idiot” (79). Cecilia interprets Robbie’s refusal to stay, motivated by nerves, as “a pretense, his

dithering refusal—he was one of the most confident people she had ever met. She was being mocked, she knew” (26). In *Atonement* the theme of false interpretation producing false “knowledge” is pervasive and common,<sup>37</sup> but here the misunderstanding is comic, a typical romantic mistake. As lovers the two must experience significant mix-ups before they can come together – the trope is as old, at least, as Shakespeare. Robbie’s naïveté heightens the comedy, for despite his first in English at Cambridge, he is unprepared for the feelings of being in love:

He had spent three years drily studying the symptoms, which had seemed no more than literary conventions, and now, in solitude, like some ruffed and plumed courtier come to the edge of the forest to contemplate a discarded token, he was worshiping her traces—not a handkerchief, but fingerprints!—while he languished in his lady’s scorn. (79)

The fingerprints he speaks of, the ephemeral “traces” of Cecilia, are found on “the volume on Versailles [Robbie] had borrowed from the Tallis library... not her kind of book, or anyone’s really, but she handed it to him from the library steps and somewhere on its leather surface were her fingerprints” (79). The book’s esoteric hopelessness complements Robbie’s yearning and humorously wistful pathos. However, and very importantly, the book descends from the Tallis library – ostensibly the ordered sanctuary

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<sup>37</sup> As a general pattern, Brian Finney writes that “Every time a character misinterprets the situation it proves to be the consequence of a faulty projection on his or her part onto another character,” a repeated act of interpretive misunderstanding that “can have actual tragic consequences” (80).

of their household – and it is Cecilia who hands it down to him, sparking the “symptoms” of love, of which Robbie has read in Freud, “Keats, Shakespeare and Petrarch, and ... *The Romaunt of the Rose*” (79), but never experienced.

This blushing comic beginning leads into the scene usually designated as *the* library scene, an event that reverberates within *Atonement*'s text. It is, again, presented twice; first through Briony's childish eyes and then through Robbie's memory of the experience. An occasion characterized by a chiaroscuro of light and sound that conveys the library's liminal nature, the space is figured as dark and quiescent, marked by a heavy door and an implied auditory solitude. The library's presence implicitly provides a sense of sanctuary and a recognizable space set apart. Robbie realizes the possibilities of this physical isolation, hidden even from the acute ears of Emily Tallis, where “none of the ordinary sounds that might have reminded them, might have held them back, could reach them” (128). Even as Cecilia believes she has heard a faint noise – the door opening – Robbie reiterates his faith in the library's “total silence” (130). Unfortunately for Robbie and Cecilia, this is not the case. Briony is drawn into the library by “a scraping noise followed by a thump and a murmur” (115), the soft betrayals of love behind closed doors. Although it appears to be totally isolating, the library cannot be a universe unto itself.

More important than these sounds are the transformative visions in the liminal space of the library: the seductive interplay between presence and disappearance, light and dark. While a single desk lamp provides the library its “only light” (116), Cecilia draws Robbie further into the library's dark recesses, “mov[ing] beyond the light, down

past the shelves... moving further away, toward the corner, into deeper shadow”; stepping after her, Robbie is cautiously “unwilling to let her out of close range” (124). The retreat from rational light into night’s mystery provokes uncertainty, but also desire: Robbie fears that this moment will vanish – as if “a dream” (130). The symbolic presence of familiar literary romances in the assembled volumes surrounding reinforces the moment’s intensity and even overwhelms Robbie’s grasp on lucid rationality; indeed, he watches as Cecilia “seemed to slide along [the shelves], as though about to disappear between the books” (124-5). In this tense and unfamiliar moment permeated by the ethereal possibility of movement, it certainly seems that nothing would be more logical than for the lovers to vanish into the common narrative of successful romance. As Robbie passionately presses Cecilia “hard into the corner, between the books” (127) the lovers move “beyond the present, outside time, with no memories and no future” (128), an area occupied almost exclusively by the timeless myths each has studied. Their love, like that of ancient stories, threatens to become transcendent, stealing the lovers away into romantic fantasy. But, like fantasy itself, this is but a dream sheltered by the library.

Drawn into the library and into each other’s impassioned embrace, their sexual act physically atones for their previous misunderstandings, such as their mutual reserve at Cambridge or the lingering distance of class tensions. Startled by an sudden onrush of feelings and adrenaline, “face to face in the gloom” (128) of the half-lit library, they experience a “wondrous... change”: Robbie calls his new feelings “as fundamentally biological... as birth,” and Cecelia is “overwhelmed by the beauty in a face which a

lifetime's habit had taught her to ignore" (129).<sup>38</sup> As readers, we can interpret these statements as the rapturous declarations of two relatively inexperienced lovers, but we can also read these movements and changes in the library as generally transgressive acts that blur the boundaries between bodies familiar and foreign, between reality's certainty and dream's intensity. The ordered sanctuary of the library gives the two a necessary confidence to transform their feelings into actions, its dim light the ideal provocation to readjust their visions of self and other.

Walking into this dream-like environment, Briony understandably wonders if "her overanxious imagination had projected the figures onto the packed spines of books" (116) – an ironic reversal, as books usually project figures into their readers' imaginations, but also a recognition of the lovers' near entry into a successful romantic narrative. The dim lighting and her youthful inexperience lead her to quickly misinterpret the "dark shapes in the furthest corner of the library": "her immediate understanding was that she had interrupted an attack, a hand-to-hand fight" (116). Without a second thought, lacking the necessary perspective, Briony drastically

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<sup>38</sup> Elsewhere Anne Carson strikingly calls this "the situation of looking at a well-known face, whose appearance is exactly as it should be in every feature and detail, except that it is also, somehow, deeply and glowingly, strange" (20). Despite the fact that Carson refers to the madness of dreams, and in a different situation, hers is an intriguing reflection on McEwan's scene of passion explored in the dark spaces of the library. There is certainly a sense of madness in the sudden love of Robbie and Cecilia, the mercurial and even feverish quickness of their realization and pursuit of mutual desire.

misconstrues Robbie and Cecilia's behaviour in the library just as she had previously misinterpreted the events at the fountain.

After their interrupted love-making in the library Robbie and Cecilia are relentlessly pulled apart, first by dinner's decorum and then by Briony's false accusations, which lead to Robbie's imprisonment and military career. Even so, they manage to stay in touch by letter throughout their long separation. These missives are censored by a strict psychiatrist and accordingly stripped of sensual emotions: the sexual "maniac" Robbie "was not to be stimulated" (192). To evade the hostile gaze which confiscates even "timid expression[s] of affection" the lovers turn to what can only be called literary cryptography: "they wrote about literature, and used characters as codes" (192). If the library is taken as a metonym for their shared cultural heritage and even, following the two formative events there, as a symbol of their personal history, then the lovers' cryptic communication takes from the library a shared registry of names and events to communicate their emotions and desires. The library itself provides the key and the language for their private communiqués:

Mention of 'a quiet corner in a library' was a code for sexual ecstasy. ...

When she wrote, 'I went to the library today to get the anatomy book I told you about. I found a quiet corner and pretended to read,' he knew she was feeding on the same memories that consumed him every night. (192)

While it is true, as the narrative claims, that "[e]verything they had, rested on a few minutes in a library years ago" (193), an even older and much more diffuse library than



the Tallis' allows them to continue "making love for years—by post" (193): the shared library of their education in British literature to whose silent promise Briony entrusts *Atonement*. If Robbie feels himself a "Prometheus," eternally chained and devoured, then Cecilia is a "patient Griselda" (192):<sup>39</sup> by these shared figures the lovers express and understand each other.

The use of a shared hypothetical library as a tool for understanding and communicating emotions is a common form of intertextual prompting in *Atonement*. Robbie and Cecilia most frequently invoke canonical texts. Cecilia whispers lines from Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* to Robbie before he is taken by the police in order to communicate her steadfast courage and love – "Oh, when I was in love with you, / Then I was clean and brave" (247) – while at supper only hours before Robbie compared his racing thoughts to those of Shakespeare's Malvolio, who he had played in college (123). Robbie is sexually prepared by "reading the Orioli edition of *Lady Chatterly's Lover*" (124),<sup>40</sup> while Cecilia's experience is limited to the second-hand information embedded in

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<sup>39</sup> A.S. Byatt remarks that Griselda, a character of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, does not die but rather "vanish[es] into the afterlife of stories" (125). Anticipating this afterlife may provide Cecilia and Robbie some comfort; it certainly foretells their future status as characters with a narrative post-life existence.

<sup>40</sup> Arguing for unconscious influence, Ingersoll writes that "[s]ince *Atonement*'s setting is 1935, illegal copies of the novel Lawrence published in Italy in 1928 would still have a certain cachet, especially among the young. The taboo word *cunt* from that fugitive novel writes itself into Robbie's letter from the text of his unconscious where it has inscribed itself. In addition Robbie has been gazing at an illustration of female genitalia in a medical text, one of the few sources of sex education at the time" ("Intertextuality" 250).

“films...novels and lyrical poems” (128). Expressions of love derived from textual sources are also integral to young Briony’s declared love for Robbie: she uses, the narrator implies, “[l]ines... from one of her books, one she had read lately, or one she had written” (218). As Lola and Paul demonstrate, this form of intertextual communication goes beyond romantic declarations, and even intelligent conversation. Although both pretend to have seen *Hamlet*, their familiarity with the play is superficial at best. She “had in fact seen a matinee pantomime” and “he too had neither read nor seen the play” (57). This fraudulent state of affairs does not prevent Paul from pretentiously musing over that lines from Shakespeare – “To be, or not to be” – that is surely the most oft-quoted and abused of any play.

These multiple textual referents indicate the widespread use of texts in characters’ daily and extra-ordinary lives, an indefinite, vaguely nationalist hypothetical library available to shape and influence expression and feeling. Some characters deploy its resources duplicitously; others do so subversively, or unconsciously. These references create an echoing chamber where an individual’s inchoate or silenced sentiment is bolstered by others’ articulate confirmation; simultaneously, they indicate the potential future success of Briony’s project of atonement for the lovers. Robbie’s half-uttered hope, that the names of Tallis and Turner join those of other famous lovers, seems not so farfetched after all – although perhaps not in the happy way that Robbie may have intended. A ghost romance, a tale of dead lovers, *Atonement* places Cecilia and Robbie’s story on the same metaphorical shelf, and in the same library.

### 3.3 THE PHYSICAL LIBRARY: NOT JUST A SYNECDOCHE

The library has two strong metaphorical influences within *Atonement*: it aids Briony's atonement by providing a generous space of preservation, and it grants Robbie and Cecilia a private linguistic space for their love, not to mention a potential afterlife.

However, the library is also an inescapably physical entity within the story and at the center of the Tallis household. One of the only spaces associated with Jack Tallis, the library is a site of authority; it is even a site of healing when associated with the heirloom vase broken by Robbie and left in the library to bake by Cecilia. Consonant with the architecture of the house and the figure of the patriarch it is, however, hardly surprising that the library is also an ironic place, a structure that, like the rest of the house, is but a superficial pretense. And yet, despite this ironic slant, the library is finally a site not only of performance but also of transformation and real change. I have already discussed the Tallis library's presence in Cecilia and Robbie's romance (as a quiet and dim place set apart), but the library's influence is not limited to the lovers.

The Tallis family library is, first and foremost, treated ironically, as is the household in general. While the large country house indicates the family's upward social aspirations, the narrative deflates these pretensions as part of a larger theme illustrating what Brian Finney calls the "contrast [of] complacent prewar English society with its shattered wartime self" (*English Fiction* 88). The Tallis lineage anxiously adheres to a

superficial conception of respectability predicated on a rigorously ordered existence. Briony's priggish obsession with order and security descends from her grandfather Henry, "who grew up over an ironmonger's shop and made the family fortune with a series of patents on padlocks, bolts, latches and hasps," a man who "had imposed on the new house his taste for all things solid, secure and functional" (18). Such emphatic security, associated with workmanlike quality, disappears in the family's later aspirations. Once gone, only illusions and ghosts remain in this house secured by a dead patriarch and an absent father.

Ironic revelations communicate the superficiality of the house's illusions. One prominent example is the description of a dining room decoration:

The portrait, in the style of Gainsborough, showed an aristocratic family – parents... pale as ghouls – posed before a vaguely Tuscan landscape. No one knew who these people were, but it was likely that Harry Tallis thought they would lend an impression of solidity to his household. (118)

Some of Gainsborough's subversive spirit infuses this passage: his distaste for the aristocratic portraits he was financially compelled to paint resonates with the narration's ironic demonstration of Henry Tallis' myopic purchase, a selection that values only its superficial qualities – a valuable painting of an aristocratic family – and obviously elides its lifeless and even vaguely threatening presentation. Far from illustrating the family's prestige, the portrait silently betrays its superficial understanding of quality.

The library reveals a similar myopia, its presence presumably a nod to aristocratic commonplaces. Rather than reflecting an individual's personal tastes, the library contains either blandly ubiquitous "complete sets" of English classics – "Jane Austen, Dickens, Conrad, all in the library downstairs" (143) – or random and obscure books such as the volume on Versailles which, Robbie admits, is useless to anyone (79). Robbie knows that a library doesn't have to be this bland: he dreams of a collection containing "books by the thousand," a place "vast and gloomy, richly crammed with the trophies of a lifetime's travel and thought" (87). Unlike Henry Tallis, Robbie clearly sees the symbolic meaning of the library's contents, the link between carefully chosen books and "a lifetime's" study; that honest, if slow, means of creating a library. Henry's library demonstrates instead the conspicuous powers of wealth, not the qualities of discernment.

An ironic emblem of absent authority (so bland it might as well contain cardboard spines hiding blank pages) the library aligns itself with another destabilized traditional authority: the patriarch of the family, Jack Tallis; Leon's "Old Man" (49). One of Jack's rare appearances takes place when Emily remembers finding him asleep in the library; when not asleep he is gone to London. Briony also remembers her father who, she thinks, "knew most things worth knowing, and when he didn't know, he had a good idea which authority to consult, and would take her into the library to help him find it" (115). A location associated with remembered authority, then, and even intellectual activity, the library is naturally where the police isolate Briony. As a site of order and collection it abets her confidence and ability "to build and shape her narrative" (169) – however, the

library's superficiality influences Briony's distorted testimony. Like libraries everywhere, the Tallis library functions as a place of authority and collection, yet its authority is undermined by its ambiguous and superficial origins.

Despite such pejorative associations, the household library is still a positive and potentially transformative influence. Within the library the emblematic broken vase heals, its parts coming together under exposure to sun (40).<sup>41</sup> Briony especially makes use of the library's space of performance and transformation. "[E]ncouraged to read her stories aloud in the library," Briony breaks the library's unspoken rule of quietude with astonishing results: "it surprised her parents and older sister to hear their quiet girl perform so boldly, unapologetically demanding her family's total attention as she cast her narrative spell" (6). Emboldened by their permissiveness and the library's generosity, Briony's transformation from quiet reader to commanding performer occurs whether she reads her own stories, as above, or spins a narrative for the police and her parents. The performance in each case seems effective. In a novel which seems to be consciously acting out Shakespeare's famous line from *As You Like It* – "All the world's a stage, / And the men and women merely players" (II.VII. 139-140) – the library provides the stage for the plays' enactment. During the eventful day, however, its space is ruptured by traumatic heat and personal quarrels, and the play is cancelled, causing Leon to complain

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<sup>41</sup> Finney, among others, notes the special significance of the vase. He writes that its "fracturing and eventual destruction function as an imagistic prolepsis, anticipating that of the family and the prewar society to which it firmly belongs" (*English Fiction* 92).

during supper that “[o]n a cooler day we’d be in the library watching the theatricals now” (122). As a container that transcends its contents – those books chosen blindly – the library gives its inhabitants a generous and permissive space to perform and transform the dramas of life that are both scripted and lived through.

The house library’s last appearance is almost poignant, although it maintains its performative, transformational potential. In 1999, long after the family has sold the house, a reunion brings the scattered descendents back to the library.<sup>42</sup> Booked “for the exclusive use” of the family (343), the library is stripped of books (346). Ironically, however, it is just as effective as it had been when books lined its walls – perhaps even more effective now that the insipid books are gone, and with them the sense of pretension and superficiality. In this pruned but revitalized library Briony’s play, cut short so many years ago, resumes. With its performance the expectant ghosts of long ago are in some small way placated; some needed closure granted, if of a minor sort. Stripped of pretension and classics the library is a healthier space, freed from the prejudices of its founder’s myopia. The performance of Briony’s long-forgotten play feels intuitively positive, a fresh beginning in the library emptied of its books, but not its readers.

There is one last physical library which should be discussed before this chapter closes: the Imperial War Museum library. Like the rest of *Atonement* it comes in double vision: the fictional library Briony visits is a cameo appearance of the library McEwan had

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<sup>42</sup> The house is renamed “Tilney’s Hotel” in what Brian Finney calls a “sly tribute” to Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (*English Fiction* 94).

visited looking for the “unpublished letters, journals, and reminiscences of soldiers and nurses serving in 1940” that were so crucial to his narrative – resources Briony also puts to use (“Acknowledgements”). This double-vision reinforces the importance libraries have in chaos’ wake, their help in piecing together the story of what happened, what was lost, and what remains. The War Museum library has a particularly prominent legacy: its “reading room... was formerly the chapel of the Royal Bethlehem Hospital—the old Bedlam. Where the unhinged once came to offer their prayers, scholars now gather to research the collective insanity of war” (333). It is in this library that the letters of Robbie and Cecilia are stored, and it is here that Briony, in turn, stores her correspondence with Nettle, Robbie’s wartime companion, “with all the other [letters she had] given” (339). However, the Museum is naturally a public institution and, in a further ironic twist, receives not only Briony’s legacy (and *Atonement*’s promise to clear Robbie’s name) but also a financial grant from Paul and Lola Marshall – whose silence colluded with Briony’s testimony to falsely accuse Robbie, as it was in fact Paul who was the true rapist (340). Indiscriminately generous, the library takes its patronage as it may, even from such opposed legacies.

It may seem bathetic to end with this rather prosaic description of the Tallis family library and the War Museum library, the one an ambiguous space of transformation and the other a vastly important, but hardly dramatic, source of information and recollection. Surely, one thinks, the library of Briony’s salvation is more sweepingly important; surely the shared cultural library of Robbie and Cecilia’s love is



more dramatic, more passionate. I recognize this criticism as valid – and yet there is something indefinite but ultimately hopeful in the tangible libraries of *Atonement*, in the visceral influence they produce. There is a very real quality to them that strongly contrasts with the elaborate fantasies of Borges, or the poetic architecture of Ondaatje, a palpable concreteness that makes their function in McEwan’s narrative a completely plausible one. At the heart of even the most ordinary library is the magical potential for transformation: of self, as Briony illustrates; or of memory, what *Atonement* works to change. Even the Tallis’ library gives space to the lovers and books to its readers, and although it may be hopelessly prosaic, it is no less important for being so.

Ultimately, there is something quite honest about McEwan’s treatment of the library. His admission of the War Museum library’s role in his and Briony’s efforts has the ring of simple truth, and Briony’s additions to the library illustrate the on-going nature of the library’s efforts, despite being financed by the Marshalls. Moreover, there is something very affecting in the first and final performance of “The Trials of Arabella” amid the bare walls – but lively conversations – of the old library, so many years after the deaths of those who might have originally watched it. As the books of the library are, in the end, replaced by the dramatic play, so do we understand that it is not the book as a material object that is important but rather the story contained therein, the narrative performed for delight and instruction. The library without books is not characterized by absence; rather, it is a witness and future promissory to the many narratives-in-progress: texts such as “The Trials of Arabella” or Briony’s just completed story. This mundane

existence underscores and makes possible the essential promise of Briony's hypothetical library and the very existence of the shared cultural archive, and thus forms one of the major themes of *Atonement*, the novel so concerned with fiction's efficacy and ubiquity.

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Ultimately, the library is not in and of itself a figure of great emotional importance. Emotions come from the lovers and Briony, from those flesh and blood beings of time and humanity and from those resuscitated memories of the dead. The library's place is different – a space apart. It is the catalyst and the support for the dreams of transient existence, the place where time does not intrude and memory may be eternally preserved. This is what Briony is counting on: that Robbie and Cecilia, robbed of their lives, might escape from time, into the romance that they almost slipped into together, that day in the library. Finally, this is where an author may find inspiration and knowledge, where both McEwan and Briony discover the material that makes their stories possible. As a catalyst, it is the purpose of the library to convey emotions and to provide for their sustenance; it is the place where these appeals to a place out of time may happen. *Atonement* knows well that the collective act of coming together, of being “at one” or atoning, depends upon the generous promise of the library, and upon the essential continuation of literary effort and human expression.

## CHAPTER FOUR: “IN QUEST OF A BOOK”

All earthly existence must ultimately be contained in a book.

Stéphane Mallarmé, “The Book: A Spiritual Instrument”

According to Mallarmé, the world exists for a book; according to Bloy, we are the versicles or words or letters of a magic book, and that incessant book is the only thing in the world: or, rather, it is the world.

Jorge Luis Borges, “On the Cult of Books”

In this third chapter, I offer up a final paradox: the radical assertion that a single book can be, in and of itself, the ultimate library. This paradox entails a complication, for the book assumes the library’s mandate to order and name the world; it becomes a dream of preserved and collected knowledge that must be always pursued, but can never be achieved. A number of other writers and poets, among whom Stéphane Mallarmé and Jorge Luis Borges number prominently, have suggested that the gradual written distillation of human experience into a generously accommodating library also occurs, perhaps more readily, in the creation of a single book, a catalogue of sorts. Writing always transforms personal experience into a more universalized textual voice, transforming broader lived experience into a more portable and digestible form, and in much the same way a catalogue writes the concise record of the library’s contents into one text. If we accept Alberto Manguel’s supposition that the true or ideal library is constrained by neither time nor space, we must then countenance an extreme possibility,

the looming spectre of a volume similarly unbound by finitude. “The broader the category,” Manguel writes, “the less circumscribed the book” (*Night* 46). This imagined book takes as its category nothing less than the universe it seeks to re-present and thus re-order; like the “total library” it emulates the desires of Alexandria and Babel and, seeking to overcome nature, becomes grotesque. Such an object is briefly mentioned in the closing footnote to “The Library of Babel,” but finds a more complex discussion in Borges’ late short story, “The Book of Sand” (1975). Thomas Wharton’s recent novel *Salamander* (2001) narrates the creation of the same object. With reference to these complementary texts, I mean to discuss the object and its myth in this chapter – the condensed representation of the library as a premiere symbol of order, collection, accessibility and preservation – the dream of an infinite book.

First, however, a word on the linguistic theory which engenders such a book. To his credit, Borges never believed in the tenets of his “Library of Babel”;<sup>43</sup> yet the fertile idea behind that Library supplied his imagination grounds for another exploration of spatial and chronological boundaries in the figure of a universal catalogue. This compendium would contain all the works of the universal library and retain its twin ambitions: to unite all expression over the space of the globe, and to bring together all

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<sup>43</sup> The Library of Babel, based on a theory of what Borges elsewhere calls a “combinatory game” of linguistic symbols, fails to acknowledge that, again in Borges’ words, “a book is more than a verbal structure ... a book is a dialogue with the reader... [and] that dialogue is infinite” (“For Bernard Shaw” 163). Literature, in this sense, is not “verbal algebra” (164). Rather, it is something much more meaningful, an ever-changing and natural play of words and interpretations.

diverse works over the span of recorded time. Borges' mind-bending book relies upon the same linguistic suppositions, a set of familiar ideas that Alberto Manguel clearly and precisely describes:

[E]very book, any book, holds the promise of any others, both mechanically and intellectually. Every text is a combination of the twenty-four letters of the alphabet (more or less, according to each language). For that reason, an infinite combination of these letters would give us a complete library of every conceivable book past, present, and future. (*With Borges* 85)

Yet Manguel explores the idea further and sees that, if these principles hold, then "[t]he reverse is also true. The infinite library can be considered superfluous... since a single book can hold all others" (*With Borges* 86). The single book must simply be infinitely long.<sup>44</sup> The infinite book makes the thoughts and desires of the ambitious library visible and even tactile: it is a dream that transforms ambitious potential into irrefutable presence. However, just like the dream of the universal library, the dream of an infinite

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<sup>44</sup> Another view acknowledged by Manguel holds that "[t]here are certain books that, in themselves, are an ideal library" (*A Reader* 269). These books so powerfully resonate in one's idiosyncrasy that they *seem* absolutely universal, infinitely meaningful. Manguel, for his part, lists "Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Dante's *Commedia*, [and] Chateaubriand's *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*" (269), but I suspect that every reader would nominate his or her own "infinite books" – books that should more properly be called "infinitely readable books," for they are infinite in spirit and not as literal fact.

book is more nightmare than fairytale, despite its intriguing nature. I turn to Borges for a story of the infinite book, the refined or distilled articulation of the universal library.

#### 4.1 A STRANGER STORY: BORGES' INFINITE BOOK OF SAND

And O, the majesty of dreams.

Laurie Anderson, "Another Day in America"

In a song from her recent album *Homeland* (2010), Laurie Anderson calls the grand dream of America "majestic," but imbues her vision with dark, nightmarish tones that echo the atmosphere of Borges' short story "The Book of Sand" (1975). One of his later stories, it retains Borges' sense of interwoven caution and wonder, compressing a haunting glimpse of infinity within a story only pages long. Surprisingly, for all its fantasy, the narrative also tenaciously retains an element of the commonplace – it begins, simply enough, with a prosaic description of sparse living arrangements that suspiciously resemble Borges' own: a small and unadorned apartment with a select library of books. However, the quiet sense of order is quickly upset by the intrusion of a Bible-peddling stranger.<sup>45</sup> Rebuffed by the nameless narrator's blunt refusal of his wares, the stranger

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<sup>45</sup> The stranger's Scottish origin is notable given Borges' famous admiration for Scottish writers. It is not coincidental that the narrator exclaims a "love for Stevenson and Hume" (482). The reverence for Stevenson particularly resonates: Manguel's compact novella *Stevenson Under the Palm Trees* (2002) not only echoes Stevenson's *The Beach of Falesa* (1892), but finds Stevenson himself visited by a very similar

quickly offers up “a sacred book” he found in India (480), a “clothbound octavo volume” with “unusual heft” (481). An air of long use surrounds this book that “had clearly passed through many hands,” and its strange characters are on pages “worn and badly set ... printed in doubled columns, like a Bible” (481). Fishing for information, the narrator asks if it “is a version of Scripture in some Hindu language” (481). The book is much more than that, of course, but the object’s possibly numinous genesis adroitly recalls the suspicions of a previous unnamed narrator, the dying librarian of the purportedly numinous Library of Babel.

What *is* the book, and what does it mean? The stranger nominates two titles for it: “The Book of Books” and “The Book of Sand,” the latter chosen “because neither sand nor this book has a beginning or an end” (481). Like sand, the book’s contents are innumerable and virtually homogenous – one page, though different from all others, loses its uniqueness in the infinite pages. While paging through the book the narrator witnesses illogical pagination and mystifying illustrations: “the even-numbered page would carry the number 40,514, let us say, while the odd-numbered page that followed it would be 999... the next page bore an eight-digit number” (481). Such confusion is, we might recall, also the true order of the Library of Babel. However, the abrupt failure of rational numerical progression bewilders the narrator, as does his immediate inability to find the same page twice or even the first page since “several pages always lay between the

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stranger selling Bibles. Wharton’s *Salamander* also holds his brand of adventure story in high regard, although his employment of the genre fails to entirely satisfy, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

cover and [his] hand” (481). The book literally has neither beginning nor end. The stranger takes the narrator’s confusion as opportunity to describe the book, saying that the books pages are “literally infinite. No page is the first page; no page is the last” (482).

Despite his reservations, the narrator is so enticed that he trades his Wyclif Bible for the infinite book, “hid[ing] it behind some imperfect volumes of the *Thousand and One Nights*” (483).<sup>46</sup> From here the story rushes through four paragraphs into territory reminiscent of the earlier “The Library of Babel.” During an insular and extended examination of the book, the narrator’s few friends leave him and, cloistered, he oscillates between a chilling insomnia and incessant dreaming about the book. Finally he wakes up to conclude that “the book was monstrous... a nightmare thing, an obscene thing... it defiled and corrupted reality” (483). By this point the story’s internal logic has become recognizably warped, totally absurd, and the narrator hesitates to burn the infinite book, afraid that the flames “might be similarly infinite, and suffocate the planet in smoke” (483). Heeding the analogy that “the best place to hide a leaf is in the forest,” the narrator entrusts the Book to a “National Library” containing “nine hundred thousand books,” one that, it must be said, resembles the library of Buenos Aires (483). (The narrator, who

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<sup>46</sup> Lisa Block de Behar finds this particular detail extremely significant: she writes in typically elliptical fashion that the narrator “prefers to occult—truth, the book—behind another book that is a fiction of fictions” (129). *The Thousand and One Nights*, itself fragmented and “imperfect” (Borges 483), “holds mysteries that holds other mysteries,” Block de Behar writes, it “occults the character or occults (from him) reality, like it occulted the Book of Sand on a shelf of the library, insinuating the rigor of an inexorable law: one book occults another, or more” (130).



formerly worked at this National Library, closely resembles Borges.) Leaving the book hidden “on one of the library’s damp shelves,” the narrator ends by refusing “even to walk down the street the library’s on” (483). Obscuring the book’s very existence from reader and narrator alike, the story leaves the Book of Sand to trouble the imagination.

What can be said about Borges’ evocative story? I have so far allowed the narrative to speak for itself. Nevertheless, a few additional points should be elucidated, for Borges does more than simply narrate the possibility of the Book of Sand. Indeed, the Book is not suggested as a possibility at all. It is instead, very clearly, a terrible dream. Through a clever opening syllogism Borges explicitly insinuates that the Book exists *only* within the generic framework of fantasy. “To say that the story is true is by now a convention of every fantastic tale,” the narrator admits; “mine, nevertheless, *is* true” (480, emphasis original). The reader must conclude that the narrator’s tale is fantasy, for it follows the universal convention. Placing this admonishment at the story’s beginning lets the reader know that the Book is a fantastic hypothesis and not a plausible document – a warning no doubt inspired by the credulous reception of the nightmarish “The Library of Babel,” which produced a critical over-exuberance typified by meticulous and over-literal commentators like William Bloch, for instance.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Borges, who admits that his nightmares always have a “precise topography” (*Seven Nights* 33), wrote that his “Kafkian story” about the Library “was meant as a nightmare version or magnification,” and “certain details in that text have no particular meaning. The numbers of books and shelves that I recorded in that story were literally what I had at my elbow. Clever critics have worried over those ciphers, and generously

Although “The Book of Sand” is a fantasy it still illustrates two important points about the library. The first mention of a library comes at the story’s ending, when, like a grain of sand thrown carelessly into the desert’s expanse, the Book is deeply hidden among the National Library’s near-million other books. Borges thus acknowledges the library’s innately generous, Alexandrian impulse, so accommodating that even this “nightmare thing” finds a place (483). Further, by placing the Book within another library Borges signals the non-hierarchical, mutually inclusive nature of libraries: just as the Book contains all the contents of the library in its infinite pages, the library contains the Book as a material object.

The Book’s catalogue-like existence performs the second important relationship between it and the library, as Borges previously wrote in the final footnote to “The Library of Babel.” With dry irony Borges comments that “the vast Library is pointless; strictly speaking, all that is required is *a single volume*, of the common size... that would consist of an infinite number of infinitely thin pages” (n. 118, emphasis original). The Book of Sand, this “single volume,” perfects the Library in miniature – it is the true and accurate catalogue of the library. A catalogue traditionally compiles all the contents of a library into one volume for ease of use: this book does so on a grand scale. If the library

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endowed them with mystic significance” (“Autobiographical Essay” 45). Although authorial intent is always questionable, Borges evidently chose to emphasize his later story’s fantastical elements to prevent similar interpretations of “The Book of Sand.” Bloch, for his part, also applies his mathematician’s lens here, but his conclusion – that “*by necessity the Book of Sand itself is infinitely thin*” (54) – fails to enlighten. His suggestion that Borges’ narrator should simply use a bookmark also seems to miss the point.

responds to the basic human need to make sense out of confusion, then the Book of Sand, as the distilled essence of the universal library, is the “ultimate reduction of chaos to order,” as John Sturrock recognizes (103). Like any catalogue that seeks to regularize and quantify the complete holdings of its library, this catalogue – this Book – is the most refined and concentrated iteration possible. Manguel writes that, in general, “[i]f a library is a mirror of the universe, then a catalogue is a mirror of that mirror” (*Night* 52).

Attending to this observation we see that if the Library *as* universe was monstrous, its catalogue, the Book, is a mirror of monstrosity, a horror in its own right. Just like the Library of Babel before it, the Book of Sand is an extreme “perfect” library. And, just like the breathtakingly vast Library of Babel, and like Laurie Anderson’s majestic dreams of the American nation, the Book is also a nightmare.

#### 4.2 CHASING INFINITY: ADVENTURERS AND PRINTERS IN *SALAMANDER*

“I have journeyed in quest of a book, perhaps the catalogue of catalogues.”

Unnamed Narrator, “The Library of Babel”

A book ends only with the disappearance of its object.

Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*

Reports of horror rarely dissuade the curious, especially where there is a puzzle involved. Often it is only through immediate experience that we understand the truth of second

hand reports – this eternal curiosity is, in part, what motivates a return to the ideas of the infinite book in *Salamander* (2001), the second novel by Canadian author Thomas Wharton. Wharton’s novel narrates the quest for a version of Borges’ Book of Sand, but in addition to asking itself what it would take to print such a book, *Salamander* asks who would want, or even be able to use, an infinite book. In the process Wharton provokes philosophical questions about such a book’s genesis and function – immense questions, given the book’s infinite nature – but also pays aesthetic homage to authors he holds dear, such as Borges and Robert Louis Stevenson, mixed with the subtle techniques of Wharton’s contemporary magic realism. Recognizing that the tidiness of so-called conventional realist storytelling misses the sheer proliferate joy of messy life, *Salamander* touches on numerous thematic and plot tangents and takes pleasure in the surprise of discovering minor characters’ histories and exotic origins; it is a whirlwind adventure that creates the illusion of an infinity worth exploring.<sup>48</sup> Wharton’s magic realism invariably evokes without always exploring, knowing that to do so would destroy the magic.<sup>49</sup> Half

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<sup>48</sup> In one sense the genre is a good fit for Wharton. As Borges mentions, “the adventure story... does not propose to be a transcription of reality” (“Prologue” 6), and this agrees nicely with the fantastical elements necessary to posit an infinite book. However, as Borges also notes, an adventure story “is an artificial object, no part of which lacks justification. It must have a rigid plot” (“Prologue 6). *Salamander*’s meandering plot contravenes these latter requirements, calling into question its generic choice.

<sup>49</sup> Of the many side-stories that spill from *Salamander*’s pages, some are recognizable re-tellings such as “The True History of the Notorious Female Buccaneer, Amphitraithe Snow” (205), a story that inevitably recalls Borges’ “The Widow Ching—Pirate” from the early *A Universal History of Infamy* (1935). Other

the beauty of the story is this fragile and elusive telling; the other half comes from the quest itself, the hunt for that which – we suspect, as readers of Borges – may ultimately end in disaster.<sup>50</sup> Mere suspicions cannot assuage curiosity, however, and so driven by the desires to know and see, *Salamander* tells of the quest to find and print the infinite book: the ultimate library.

*Salamander* delicately poises its curious adventures between a number of oppositional urges, and rather than attempting to resolve or elide these conflicts, I wish to explore them as productive tensions revolving around the quest for the infinite book. Among the tensions at play are the constant interchanges between order and chaos, day and night, and cosmologies that emphasize, on the one hand, a puzzling and chaotic world in need of order's imposition or, on the other, an innately harmonious world with no need for another system of order. Certainly, as obvious symbols of collection and ordered experience, libraries of various types and cultures dot *Salamander's* narrative landscape with suspicious frequency, many of them brilliantly fantastic, but it is the

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minor stories such as the "Legend of Seshat" (195) bear no obvious literary lineage. The effect anticipates an approach Wharton takes in his later novel *The Logogryph* (2004), which aspires to graceful infinitude by weaving story after story in Scheherazade's memory.

<sup>50</sup> In an early review Francis Gilbert opines contradictorily that Wharton's magic realism "fail[s]" because its author "does not have the luxury of responding to familiar, past fictions," but also produces a "not original" plot line relying upon "a somewhat tired Borgesian trope" (54). I suggest that this dismissive reading misses Wharton's point in exploring the origins of a darkly mysterious and utterly fantastic object whose myth both predates and lasts beyond Borges.

infinite book that more than anything else organizes the juxtaposed and oppositional notes.<sup>51</sup>

To begin, Wharton's tale seeks to tell of the origins of a mythical document, but in doing so the narrative walks a fraught line for it already knows how it will end: the infinite book always exists *only* in the promise of the library, the place where it is conceived and where Borges' narrator returns it. It is, like any dream, present in thought alone. With this teleological point established Wharton can only tell of a failed genesis and the dreamers who try and bring the book to waking life. *Salamander* pre-empts itself by beginning already over, chronologically speaking – the adventure has ended, but the story is yet to come, and even by the novel's opening the seeds for another quest are sown. The book begins, in other words, in a burning bookshop during a devastating war, where among the "bombed out ruins" (1) and floating ashes of her inventory a mysterious bookstore owner named Pica resolutely continues to look, she says, for "another book.

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<sup>51</sup> A word should, however, be spared for Count Ostrov's "crowning achievement," the successful transformation of his borderland castle into an immense library (21). Ostrov illustrates the immense power of the collector-patron for whom, as Benjamin writes, "possession [and] ownership are tactical matters" (165). The Count's librarianship is not so different from his abdicated military role. Although he knows the complete inventory of his many shelves and can detect the loss of even a single volume, he is also a man who, his daughter reports, "wished to own books... Not read them" (349). The patron as possessor, not reader, then; an unfortunately familiar situation. Ostrov's hubris is so great that he desires "nothing more or less than [his] own personal edition" of "a book written in the elusive and unutterable language of God" (42): the infinite book. What he would do with it must remain an open question.

One I haven't read yet" (7).<sup>52</sup> She searches for an infinite book, but to speak of infinity is to speak of everything. Knowing this, and asked for an explanation, Pica tells an interlocutor that she "would also have to tell [him] about the books that this book might be. And the books that it is not. It could go on forever, really" (7). Out of this *Arabian Nights*-style narrative cycle comes *Salamander*, a tale that should, properly speaking, continue indefinitely.<sup>53</sup> Hidden from its searcher within the vast and boundless library of all other books, the infinite Book's magnetic absence lures the reader and characters alike. In this space – belated, foretold, anticipating but evading its own ending – *Salamander* adventurously explores the genesis of a missing object, the infinite book, Borges' Book of Sand.

I have just suggested that *Salamander*'s infinite book is Borges' Book of Sand – this is not fully true, although it has much truth in it. Printer Nicholas Flood, charged by a puzzle-mad Slovakian count to create "a book that contains everything... without beginning or ending" (55), calls his creation the "*alam*" after his assistant Djinn tells him

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<sup>52</sup> In his general argument about the "explosive potential" of books, by which I understand the inevitable tendency of a book's contents to transcend their material container, Cory Lavender sees *Salamander*'s narrative opening "[i]n ruins as a result of its own inherent explosiveness" (131); the space left open by this inaugural explosion is one that Pica's following tale rushes to fill.

<sup>53</sup> Which is not to say, however, that *Salamander* consistently manages this telling gracefully. One of the most acute criticisms of the book is that its series of adventures goes far beyond a sustainable length, and violates what Borges calls the genre's need for "a rigid plot if it [the story] is not to succumb to the mere sequential variety of *The Golden Ass*, the *Seven Voyages of Sinbad*, or the *Quixote*" ("Prologue" 6).

the word means “*everything*” (89). Flood makes the book of magical Venetian ink, legendary Chinese paper, and the skin of Sinhalese monkeys, but more important than these whimsical components are the book’s effects on reading. As with Borges’ *Book of Sand*, Pica cannot find the *alam*’s beginning, unable to part the “impossibly thin” first pages (308). She also discovers that it resists interpretation: its innate disorder renders its infinite contents bewildering, and thus she reads of “a minute description of someone’s right ear, of the surprising contents of an iron chest... of rain dripping from flower petals...” (310). Like the *Book of Sand*, the infinite book, the *alam*, is named for its totally comprehensive contents, and the two books are certainly very similar.

Certainly, as he admits in his acknowledgements, Wharton “owes much” to Borges in his formulation of the infinite book (372), yet the *alam* draws from a broader tradition. The narrative takes pains to establish the singularity of its endeavour just as it accepts many past attempts. All have a different name but the same intent – which makes sense, for an infinite book must continually reinvent itself – and Flood discovers these many names: “*Zohar. The paper-thin garden. Il’bal. ... The Book of Water. A Universal Chronopticon. The Almanac of Longing. The Formulary of the Ten Thousand Things*” (167). Kirshner, the Jewish type-caster, describes the existence of “the world’s oldest reading society... dedicated to the dreaming of fabulous, impossible, imaginary books,” “some of them, beginning as insubstantial dreams, have become paper and ink” (167). In this history *Salamander* establishes an immense if fictitious genealogy of the dreamt book, but leaves room for Flood’s own attempt. Each dream is unique; each dreamer



finds a new way of telling infinity. “Whatever else infinity may be,” Kirshner reminds Flood, “it is generous!” (169) As Kirshner defends Flood, so too Wharton defends *Salamander*, itself a new invention of the limitless Book.

Fittingly, considering its emphasis on this dreamt object, *Salamander* illustrates the archetypal tension between day and night and, in particular, the borderland between the two times: the partially-lit night. Candles and flickering light illuminate many key moments, such as the opening scene where Bougainville is attracted by “a flicker of candlelight deep within the shadows” (1), or the scene lit by the eerie light of the imprisoned Abbé de Saint-Foix’s lone lantern, deep in the darkness of Alexandria’s “well of stories,” an immense abyss where “candles go out from lack of air” (193). Equating the lone light to the solitary intellect seems inevitable, given the tendency to deploy the vocabulary of light to connote intelligence, but it is interesting how often the darkness comes from locations of despair: prisons, mental hospitals, ruins. Most important, however, are Nicholas Flood’s nocturnal affiliations. In a novel set in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the so-called Age of Reason, the day time world “is a crystal of perfect clarity” (11). In contrast Flood “had begun to inhabit another world... his words came from a lunar distance” (276). He finds shelter in the borderland between noon-day and midnight, between the terrible brightness and the Abbé’s suffocating abyss; here, in this middle zone, he finds madness, but also inspired creativity. This lunar state entails a mental risk, however, represented by Flood’s later confinement in Bedlam (324). Between the abyssal

night and the crystalline day lies a flickering and moonlit time of liberating creation, a space Flood manages to navigate for a time.

Part of what makes the nocturnal space so important is its transgressive appeal, something that gains importance given *Salamander*'s heightened attention to time's constricting function. Reviewer Roz Kaveney has noted that "[i]magery of freedom and confinement abound" in *Salamander* (23), but these repeated surface images indicate a deeper conversation about the function of time's passing. Does time's inescapable passage confine life, or continue it? Can one escape time? Would this even be advisable? These questions are foregrounded by the Abbé's insane quest to recover "his secret refuge: the library" (73), where he seemingly eludes time. Ever since childhood, when he first felt the threat of death in time's ineluctable passage, represented by the ever-ticking clock, the Abbé has sought to halt or master time. He finds a way to do so in his father's library composed of a multitude of blank books. Reading these books removes his consciousness from linear time by immersing it in empty pages. "Within every book there lies concealed a book of nothing," he learns; a "vast gulf of emptiness beneath the frail net of letters... [g]iving a semblance of life to things and people who are really nothing" (75-6): here time has no meaning or control. In the *alam*'s endless pages the Abbé senses "an infinite amount of nothing," and thus a return "to the paradise of [his] father's library" (331) where he might escape the clock and contentedly read nothing forever; he enters an eternal night. The Québécois ecclesiastic joins the quest for the infinite book, if nihilistically. Ironically it is he who finally achieves his goal, escaping

into a world where clocks stop and he can “read forever” (358). As Pica realizes, this is only another form of death – something the Abbé fails to understand. Diving into the pool of type not only successfully ends time, it also ends his life. As I shall describe shortly, this ironic end reflects on the *alam* as well.

Perhaps *Salamander*'s greatest balancing act across its free-ranging adventures is its careful poise between fascination and revulsion for the *alam*, emotions contingent on the viewer's perspective on whether the universe suffers from irrational, puzzling confusion or holds together with holistic, irreducible interconnectedness. Like Borges and the library, Wharton's characters are repulsed and attracted by the *alam*, straining between exaggerated worldviews that emphasize complete order and absolute chaos. By seeking to create an infinite book, Flood must grasp and bind literally everything, for “[it] is the binding which usually announces, before anything else, the presence of a book” (198). Flood must paradoxically contain within a limited form the boundless infinite in his attempt to radically order and comprehend the world, which he sees as “a broken labyrinth of unfinished stories” (190). Fragmented and perpetually interrupted, confusingly unclear, natural life seems to have no cohesion and no order. Similarly, Count Ostrov, Flood's patron, sees “the entire universe... [as] a vast, unbounded book of riddles,” replete with “unfathomable abysses of darkness and time through which we plummet without knowing how or why” (42). Both men think that the world requires them to wrestle a visible order from seeming anarchy for, as a Chinese stationer suggests, “[n]obody knows what's next. Nobody has a clue. We live in a murky ambiguity lit by

occasional flashes of utter incomprehension” (239). The *alam* attractively imposes order on this blank, Kafkian existence; thus it provides comfort for the rational mind.

However, the *alam* also mounts an attack on the existing world, and from a different perspective its artificial comfort seems to be not only redundant, but even a violation of the existing state. The world’s seeming chaos has its own hidden order, as Djinn learns in a serendipitous encounter. His future lover employs an extended metaphor to tell him that their meeting is “not surprising”:

The road you were on is known in these parts as the Dragon Vein  
Stretching a Thousand Miles. Every mile of it is crowded with people like  
me, like the ferryman, like yourself, people with stories. And all of these  
stories are in some hidden way linked to one another, like the blood of the  
dragon flowing beneath its impenetrable hide. (261)

This metaphor illustrates a holistic and natural order, organically extending to all travellers – all living people – and not operating secretly but in a mode simply hidden to the rational eye. This state acknowledges, as do Flood and Ostrov, the bewildering variety of stories by which individuals seek to understand the world,<sup>54</sup> but instead of imposing

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<sup>54</sup> Thomas King powerfully argues this very point in a recent Massey Lecture, *The Truth About Stories* (2003). “The truth about stories,” he says, “is that that’s all we are” (32). Coffeehouse owner Henday echoes this with a truth that resonates beyond his shop, telling Nicholas Flood that “everyone in here has a story” (321). As *Salamander* intimates, what matters is how we understand and organize those stories: as an incomprehensible mass, or as an existing polyphony that may be re-collected. These stories always reinstate their nomological primacy and pre-archival immediacy, since they must exist before libraries.

strictures on these stories and binding them into one totalizing object or system, it realizes their intrinsic if surprising hidden linkages, likened here to life-sustaining blood.<sup>55</sup> In a failure strongly associated with the Abbé's misjudgement, the *alam* misunderstands this natural state of affairs, and so distrusts it. Djinn, realizing he was "wrong about the future," abandons the quest and pursues new adventure in love (265). Pica also edges toward disillusionment when, wondering if the *alam* is subject to "any order," a voice from her memory imposes a corollary question: "you could ask the same thing of the universe" (310). Pica stops short of seeing what Borges realized of the total library: that "utopia" has "certain characteristics... easily confused with virtues" ("The Total Library" 214). The *alam* is an attractive but insufferable excess; its over-rational imposition of order rejects life's intuitive and hidden nature.

Finally, like the puzzles and curiosities that form such a large part of its charm, *Salamander* pulls a last trick from its magician's sleeve. Flood's quest to create the infinite book fascinates the Québécois Abbé, who shadows Flood, Irena, and Pica for the course of the narrative and then, taking the *alam*, disappears into a pool of type, never to return. By this time Flood has died, his life consumed by the single-minded puzzle Count

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<sup>55</sup> The project to find one underlying system accounting for everything is, of course, a major element of the 18<sup>th</sup> century's conventional naming as the Age of Reason – the Enlightenment – and a significant component of its exaggerated faith in the illuminating and classifying powers of reason: what Mary Louise Pratt has called the century's European "planetary consciousness," exemplified by figures such as Carl Linnaeus who sought to incorporate "all the plants on the earth... into a single system of distinctions," a project that, Pratt recognizes, "was perceived... as making order out of chaos... the chaos of nature" (25).

Ostrov set before him so many years ago. Pica is left adrift with neither book nor father, but only the understanding that “[t]hings can be taken away so quickly” (366).

Nevertheless she carries on, her last action the discovery of a blank slug – the first and most essential piece of a printer’s type-set, on which anything may be inscribed – amidst the rubble of her shop. Pica sees in its bland and “unreadable surface” not the Abbé’s nothingness, but the vast everything of life (368). With “infinity in her pocket... the beginning of a new collection,” she too walks out of the narrative’s eye (368). Pica, like a salamander, survives the flames of her bookshop, and though her story tells of a failed creation, there is a twist to this failure, and a reason she has the materials to begin anew. Although the infinite book is a powerfully influential dream, it was never and could never be more than that. It is not the book that is truly important, but simply the quest itself.

It is apt that *Salamander* is closely associated with Alexandria and that legendary library, whereas Borges’ universal library took shape in a story obsessed with Babel and the total collection.<sup>56</sup> Babel’s totalizing impulse contrasts with the Alexandrian desire that Alberto Manguel associates with a heroic quest, a continuing drive to re-collect the experiences of all people. For questing heroes, Manguel writes, “the world (like the Library) is made up of myriad stories that, through tangled mazes, lead to a revelatory moment” (Manguel 27), although he is careful to qualify that “[r]eaders, like epic heroes,

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<sup>56</sup> *Salamander* goes so far as to resurrect the hope of the Library of Alexandria’s survival, whether ensconced in a midnight “well of stories” beneath the city (193) or tattooed, book by book, on the skin of men and women (196). Babel, in contrast, is present only in spirit and not in name.

are not guaranteed an epiphany” (28). All of *Salamander*’s characters engage in this quest; they search for epiphanies in riddles, or in books, or in the lives of each other. Most spectacularly, they search for the revelation of an infinite book that, by containing everything, guarantees them an epiphany. But life is of course much more complicated, and while some characters do achieve some measure of bliss, others die unfulfilled: it all depends, perhaps, on how much one is indivisibly tied to, or obsessed with, the idea of replacing the world as it is with the concentrated and distilled book of everything. Some give up the quest – to them *Salamander* grants the uncertainty of a romance that goes beyond its pages. Others continue the quest, having failed to receive their moment of epiphany – Pica searches not for the object her father had made, but for the next iteration of the always-new idea, “the beginning of a new collection” (368). Yet others are driven near-insane by the thought of mastery and power in the book’s endless knowledge; these characters, already veering dangerously away from their attachment to the world outside the book, renounce their ties altogether and die by the book: diving into text or simply consumed by the quest. Despite these deaths, the dream of the book may never die, for like the library it takes as its object the world itself, and cannot cease to exist until the world dies.<sup>57</sup> Until that time the infinite quest to find the book without end will continue, driven by the infinite curiosity of dreamers influenced by moonlight.

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<sup>57</sup> To recall Baudrillard’s insight that a “book ends only with the disappearance of its object” (101).

The essence of a library is that it humbly and magnificently proclaims at the same time its ambitions and its shortcomings.

Alberto Manguel, *A Reader on Reading*

The idea is a simple one, really: a singular book containing the vast collection of the library in the traditional function of the catalogue. Only, in this instance, the scale is immense. Alberto Manguel calls it “a distillation or summing up of the world that must encompass all other books” (*Night* 29); Borges’ narrator calls it “an obscene thing” (481); and Wharton’s Nicholas Flood creates it. Flood, who “always found a way to turn his mad ideas into actual books” (29), finds out from Kirshner, the old and wise Jewish type-caster of Venice, that “imaginary books are not absurd dreams but intimations of reality” (170). The dream of the book expresses the real world, however startling or unnatural it may seem at first: in dream is truth, if not literal truth. For the dreamt book, while not real, is “not impossible but merely redundant. The world encyclopedia, the universal library, exists, and is the world itself” (*Night* 89). The Book of Sand conveys in its impossible pages the incredible vastness of the world, told as a fantasy that, for Borges, dangerously borders on a Babelian totality intent on replacing the universe. For Wharton the infinite book exists as an Alexandrian hope for epiphany, an important counter-balance on the side of order against a universe that, without this hope appears utterly chaotic. However, what Borges understands perhaps better than Wharton is that the book’s very infinity makes it abhorrent and deadening; it is actually a betrayal of the



library's generous promise. Robert Harrison writes that "what is not finite cannot give birth, nor be filled with the promise of the future" (*Gardens* 17), and this is true of the infinite book: it does not offer space for expression-to-come but pre-empts these efforts; it offers no promise of growth and life, only a final completion in which there is absolutely nothing left to be said.

The infinite book is ultimately the nightmarish turn of a majestic dream, the successful penetration of the rational daytime urge to contain and classify into the nighttime promise of mystery and creation. It represents the loss of what makes dreaming so vivacious – the barely-glimpsed promise of new things to come, things that are, as yet, strange to the rational eye. Books provide the words to understand what is otherwise inchoate; they give and hold names for the things of the world so that we might call and understand them. Their effect is not only beneficial, but acutely necessary, for they complement an unnamed world that is otherwise bewildering. However, there is no life and no joy in a book that offers nothing to the future, and nothing to the world outside itself. The infinite library brings all books together; the infinite book binds all words and names into itself: these things are mad dreams, but also majestic hopes. For the curious dreamer under the moon's influence it is often difficult to distinguish between the two.

# CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Every sort of passion verges on chaos, I know, but what the collecting passion verges on is a chaos of memories.

Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library"

## 5.1 (NEVER) LEAVING THE LIBRARY

Why are there so many paradoxes inherent within the library? Furthermore, why do works that feature it prominently so often concentrate on certain fundamental tensions between the library and the world, or between imposed order and natural chaos (and the deeper tension between the chaotic nature of any order and the primal order found in chaos)? Perhaps because libraries always wish to gather the assorted things of the world: they do not wish to relinquish what they hold, to betray what they promise eternal safety and exposure. Yet they must, at some point, admit defeat. Despite fantasies such as the eternal quest for the infinite book, or the nightmare of a universal library, the simple truth is that material objects will deteriorate. A library might well be an ossuary, some suggest, or a graveyard. Worse, a library is a concentrated target for the enemies of memory, something Matthew Battles cynically emphasizes when he writes that libraries “are as much about losing the truth – satisfying the inner barbarians of princes, presidents, and pretenders – as about discovering it” (32). But while Battles’ alliterative list recognizes several conspicuous biblioclasts he misses a crucial truth about loss, a truth

Michael Bywater captures in his catalogue of things gone missing, the gracefully elegiac

*Lost Worlds:*

The gifts of life do not turn to dust, nor does loss cast a shadow. Loss sheds its light on what remains, and in that light all that we have and all that we have had glows more brightly still. (267)

The truth is that libraries are not simply places where knowledge and experience go to disappear. Instead, libraries store the records of experience that illuminate the world and its inhabitants. A library is the light by which loss can be measured, the place where the impossible task of preserving received expression from time and across geography is taken as a fundamental necessity. That this basic impulse is always circumscribed is just as inevitable as the fact that books will always moulder – a practical reality, but one that feeds and not destroys the library’s utopian dream of holding a steady light against the darkneses of absence.

A second question, then: why so many dreams? Why so many moments of hesitation between sleep and wakefulness, between the unbearable clarity of day and the abyss of night? Perhaps it is because dreams are where borders blur and thus where the tensions inherent to the library come closest to being resolved; it is a space of “de-creation,” to use Anne Carson’s term. In the space between clear rationality and hidden uncertainty the library finds the healthiest balance between its work of rationally ordering the world and its delight in chaotic surprise. A more primal answer is that the library is itself a dream, for all its monumental status and its staunch resolve to foil time and space;

a library fundamentally exerts a fevered impulse, an archival fever. Manguel thus correctly identifies its “mad dreams,” what Derrida had called the “*trouble de l’archive... the mal d’archive*” (Fever 90). There are dreams, however, and then there are nightmares.

Despite their necessity, any utopian dream risks much.<sup>58</sup> Borges knows that the library’s dream could turn into a nightmare of truly universal proportions. “The Library of Babel” tells of nothing less than Borges’ disillusionment with unilateral utopian dreams – that the story is also the ironic product of a minor functionary’s resentment against his workplace does not preclude its telling of a basic truth. A world made only for the library and not for its “librarians” is fundamentally inhuman and horrifying, for it would turn the library’s generous promise to a rapacious greed that destroys what gave it life. The condensed version of this library, the infinite book, distils such greed into a single, portable nightmare. This is the paradox and the problem of the library: that its promised generosity, which is desirable, is also undesirable. Roberto Bolaño has said that “[a] library is a metaphor for human beings or what’s best about human beings. ... A library is total generosity” (48). Total generosity: a beautiful concept, but containing its own explosive problems, just as the books collected by the library explosively refuse

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<sup>58</sup> Fredric Jameson’s study of “the desire called utopia,” *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), calls utopian thinkers “maniacs and oddballs” (10). While Jameson’s argument as a whole resists simplification, he concedes that utopias are “very much wish-fulfillments and hallucinatory visions in desperate times” (233). The library’s utopian dream runs exactly along this fraught line. However, it is also a necessary dream, for it responds to Jameson’s comment in the same argument that “we need to develop an anxiety about losing the future... about the loss of the past and of memory and childhood” (233).

containment. From the oscillation between the necessary and desirable order of preservation and the avoidance, fear, and mistrust of such a potentially totalizing force comes the tension at the heart of any representation of the library. It is the tension of the dream – the desire for something unattainable, and the question of how far it is necessary to pursue this impossibility – that informs any library plotted into a fictional text.

However, to understand the predictability of the library as a plot device is not necessarily to understand its essential nature, although it may certainly contribute to this latter, deeper knowledge.<sup>59</sup> My choice to focus on novels foregrounding a certain form of catastrophic destruction and loss – world war, the subject of *Atonement* and *The English Patient* – reveals a plot tendency where figures of chaos invoke their archetypal others, the figures of order and collection: the library, the museum, the book. *Atonement* and *The English Patient* try to contain world war by laying against it the hope and possibility

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<sup>59</sup> For example, I might have studied a series of post-apocalyptic novels to discover that the library occurs with startling consistence in two positions: as a beginning point of these texts that foretell what happens after the end of everything, or as a desirable structure to be reached or constructed by the novel's completion. There are two plots, in other words: either life springs forth from the library to the new world, or the new world seeks to construct a new repository of stable knowledge. Stories such as Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1960), Tatyana Tolstoya's *The Slynx* (2003), and Neal Stephenson's *Anathem* (2008) all begin with monastic libraries intact – if largely incomprehensible; while other types of post-apocalyptic fiction such as Jack Vance's *The Dying Earth* (1950) display a narratological yearning toward the stable and safe place of the library or museum, using this space as a destination for many characters' adventures and even, in the metaphor of a "spell library," a continuing project of accumulating lost or scattered knowledge.

of a collection that will continue to make order – and sense – of the world. Similarly, *Salamander* begins with a burning bookshop, but narrates the hope for a book that, like the novel's namesake, cannot burn. However, these archetypal oppositions fail to tell the whole story.

What I have sought to do in my analyses is to illustrate how representations of libraries work, and not just what triggers them. Thus I have sought to reveal what I would call the architecture of meaning, the structure of the library's fictional ontology.

“Architecture” because the library is, in truth, a built monument to memory, a human construct that preserves thought and expression. If this monument often takes material shape in stone or paper then it must readily admit its ruinous future. Identity can also be re-constructed, as I have tried to remember when examining *The English Patient*. Such mental architecture is both intangible and fragile; the construction of identity depends on what Benjamin calls the “chaos of memories,” the passionate recollection of self necessary to re-cognize self: to make identify out of remembered fragments. Together, these physical and mental collections are subject to the library's many conflicts: desirable, necessary, and life-giving; yet also dangerous, vulnerable, and potentially life-destroying. Mundane, and yet magical.

Embedded in the very thought of a library, in its essential architecture, is a persistent and troublesome risk. It is easy to believe that the library occupies a hermetic space set *totally* apart from the world, given its generally stable walls; it is easy to be comforted by its claims to order and preservation – perhaps even seduced by its generous

sanctuary. However, the library's existence is always contingent on the world from which it arose, not only because it came from that world, but because it is only relevant insofar as it then reflects *back* on that world. To think otherwise is to be deceived. "We have forgotten," Alberto Manguel writes, "that our libraries should open onto the world, not pretend to isolate us from it" (*A Reader* 276). It is good to hold onto this word – "pretend" – for that is essentially the only influence a library holds over worldly existence; even when it appears to supplant the universe we know this to be a nightmare only, an absurd dream that Borges has so adroitly captured. The only danger it poses to the waking world is metaphoric; it is an "intimation of reality," to use Wharton's phrase, not reality itself. Actual libraries know this, as Ondaatje and McEwan illustrate, they "understand that the walls that surround them are mere scaffolding and that their place is the wide, open world of those readers who... first recorded their experience and imagination" (*A Reader* 277). Ondaatje's library is broken open and rain-damaged; McEwan's is fundamentally ornamental. Both pretend to function, both are grievously damaged, and both hold the potential for drastic change: Hana's healing recollections, Briony's stunning performances, the love scenes between Hana and Kip, Cecilia and Robbie; all these life-sustaining acts depend upon the library's space for performance.

What these actions prove is that the "pretend" of the library is like the "pretence" of fiction: it is a radical state of make-believe. The library is a dream where we can believe that time has ended and where space is no obstacle. It is in libraries, even broken and plain, that readers are granted the transcendent potential of reading: of "see[ing] with the

eyes of others and speak[ing] with the tongues of the dead,” as Manguel writes (*A Reader* 277). Inside this transformative and performative space characters are able to piece together their own identities and find the resources to better comprehend the actions and identities of others. From the library’s open vulnerability comes a refreshed and renewed understanding of life. Both *The English Patient* and *Atonement* are novels about things broken and fractured; both respond to war’s trauma by thinking about recollection and collection, about remembrance and at-one-ment. *Salamander* also hovers around an abyss of loss, its telling motivated by Pica’s separation from friends and family, and by what seems to have become her family’s hereditary obsession, the quest for an eternal(ly-absent) book. These three novels pose storytelling as a method of coping with loss, not only because it involves writing down or telling one’s own experiences, but because it also involves reading and listening to the experiences of others. This effort inevitably involves the library, that place where one can hide from the world and, strangely enough, learn about and experience the world in a new and different way.

The library is, I have suggested, a paradoxical place, and thus very open to interpretation. Some representations focus on its potential excess, and take as their preferred method the genre of fantasy to do so, realising the library’s dream-like nature. Other representations emphasize the library’s vulnerability to material and ideological threats such as bombs, prejudiced selection, or censorship, using the techniques of literary realism to portray the library. What the two representational modes have in common is a realization of the library’s essential magic, its capacity to grant every reader



the power to deepen and broaden their understanding of the universe reflected in the library's collection. The library offers the firmer grasp on reality allowed by day's clear order, and the mysterious night's promise of newness; it concentrates the aspiration to make of disparate pieces a harmonious monument, and it exemplifies the restless search for unique fragments to collect and study: in short, the library coheres the mythic yearnings of day and night, Babel and Alexandria. Consistently paradoxical, always plotted in opposition to loss and disruption, the library retains its essential promise across representations. It is majestic and mundane, detached from and yet dependent upon the world outside it, necessary and monstrous. We can neither disregard nor valorize it.

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